



Mortal Ghost

L. Lee Lowe

**<http://mortalghost.blogspot.com>
Email 1.lee.lowe@gmail.com**

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither
A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost.

Dylan Thomas

Chapter 1

Every night Jesse lies down to sleep with fire. This time, screams and a dark chord burning. *This time*, the beam falls before his hair ignites.

Jesse woke with a start, his heart thudding. It took him a moment to remember where he was. Something in his rucksack was digging into his cheek. Wincing, he shifted on the piece of cardboard that was his mattress. The solid blocks of stone at his back, rough and lichen-crusting, made good sentries but poor bedfellows. His neck was sore and kinked, his muscles cramped, and he had pins-and-needles in the arm he'd been lying on. He needed to pee.

The dream again.

Fingering the handle of his knife, he looked about him. Just after dawn, and the air smelled fresh and clean, with a dampness that hinted at rain. His sleeping bag felt clammy, and the grass along the riverbank glistened with dew. Water lapped close by, a sound from his past, and he could hear the noisy riverbirds scolding his sluggishness.

There was no help for it. Wait too long and somebody would appear. Shaking off the last whorls of sleep, he unzipped his sleeping bag and crept out. He stretched, then made a few circles with his head, grimacing as the vertebrae in his neck rasped like the sound of Mal crushing eggshells in his fist – one of his least offensive habits. A couple of knee-bends till Jesse's bladder protested. He glanced round once more, for he didn't like to leave his things unattended for even a moment – on the street, a moment's inattention could mean the difference between a meal and hunger, between safety and a vicious beating/mutilation/rape, between survival and annihilation.

He grabbed his rucksack, thrust his knife inside, and sidled barefoot down the grassy riverbank until he came to an overgrown bush. After relieving himself, he knelt at the river's edge and rinsed his hands, then splashed cold water into his face. Not exactly clean, but it helped remove the film of sleep and dross from the morning. Distastefully, he ran his wet fingers through his hair. He needed a good wash – failing a long hot punishing shower then at least a swim in the river. Later maybe – first he would have to eat. He kneaded the skin above his waistband; he'd lost weight again, he supposed. Hunger never quite retracted its claws: on the rare occasions when he had a full belly, there was always the next meal to worry about.

It would be another long day.

From his rucksack he removed his battered water bottle and trainers. After slaking his thirst he capped the bottle and considered his next move. He always tried to find a new kip each night, and if he got lucky he might be able to locate an abandoned warehouse or garage or even an allotment shed. The docklands looked promising, although there would probably be others

with the same idea. Still, it was a largish place. He kept away from the squats. He wanted nothing to do with anyone else.

Jesse rummaged for the currant bun he'd kept back last night, then shook out his sleeping bag, formed it into a compact roll, and stored it in his rucksack, followed by the bun and his water bottle. After slipping into his trainers he wedged the cardboard between one of the bridge's massive stone abutments and a clump of wild briars, just in case he was obliged to return tonight.

It was still barely light, and except for a boat in the distance – a barge, from the long squat shape – and the birds and jazzing whirlybird insects and occasional frog, Jesse had the river to himself. He made his way along the bank in the direction of the city centre. There was a thin opaque haze over the water which the sun would soon burn away. Though overcast now, with a likelihood of rain, Jesse could tell that it would be hot later on, hot and humid. Good swimming weather. Usually the river was well trafficked, but he had yet to see anyone else swim. Of course, he always chose a secluded spot.

When hunger gnawed at him, he stopped by a sandy patch of ground, half-hidden by large boulders and a willow, to eat his rather flattened bun. He stared at his breakfast for a few seconds, then returned it to his rucksack. He'd wait. Impossible to predict how long it would be before he could earn some money. Pity that he hadn't saved that bit of sausage instead of feeding it to yesterday's stray, who probably needed it less than him.

Jesse fumbled in his pocket for the cigarette he'd picked up. Bent but only a trifle dirty at the tip – perfectly smokeable. He straightened, then lit it with one of his last matches. Back propped against the rock, he inhaled deeply and watched the river.

The cigarette did little to dull his hunger. Inadvertently, he found himself picturing bacon crisping in a cast-iron frying pan, a loaf of his grandmother's bread, a bowl of rich yellow butter. Saliva spurted into his mouth. He forced the memory into retreat – not that road.

Cigarette finished, Jesse licked his fingertips, pinched it out with his usual meticulousness, and dropped the butt back into his pocket. Then he took out his well-thumbed copy of *The Tempest*. With a few pounds, he'd be able to buy some second-hand paperbacks. Unlike most other kids on the street, he wouldn't nick anything, not even an apple from the market. He only wished he had a place to store the books. If he kept going at this rate, by winter it would be a real problem to carry them around. Of course, by winter there would be other problems – problems a little more pressing than his *luggage*. He smiled to himself. Nothing was worse than taking yourself too seriously.

The dog kept its distance at first. The two-leg was mumbling under his breath, twisting a length of hair around his finger and tugging on it. He smelled worn and musty, like a discarded shoe. The dog edged closer. It sniffed at a crushed tin, scratched itself. Loud staccato cough: the dog slunk back. The street had taught it caution, even patience.

A small movement caught the corner of Jesse's eye. He whipped his head round. Not again, he thought, shutting his book. So many of his mistakes came back to haunt him. The dog moved closer, licked at Jesse's hand.

‘What do you want? I’ve got nothing to feed you.’

The dog stared up at him with large, sentimental eyes. A big skinny creature, black fur dirty and matted, but otherwise in pretty good shape. Jesse wondered how it managed so well on the street.

‘I bet you could teach me a thing or two,’ he said.

Jesse stood, jingling the coins in his pocket. They hadn’t earned any interest overnight – just enough for a hot drink and a hamburger. No doubt a sell-by loaf and some milk would be smarter, but at the burger places they usually didn’t notice how long you used the lavatory. He could at least brush his teeth, maybe wash his neck and hair. Stripping would be risky, unless he could bolt the door. Few people had seen him without pants, no one without his T-shirt. He didn’t do naked.

Jesse glanced at the sky. The cloud cover resembled an old greying sheet, thin cheap cotton to begin with, the kind they gave you in those rundown places where, for a few quid, you could get a bed for the night – he’d slept a couple of times in one or another of them when he had some money and was desperate for a real mattress and real roof and real shower – the kind of linen that didn’t even *remember* white, that you could put your foot through, and did. Only here it was the sun that was breaking through the crumpled and dingy fabric.

The rain would hold off for a few hours. Ample time to eat and find shelter. It was bad enough being dirty and bedraggled, but a wet T-shirt was uncomfortable and wet jeans, a torment. He had only one change of clothes, none too clean. Filthy, actually. He knew there were certain things he could do – or allow to be done to him – that would get him a night or two in someone’s flat, bathroom and washing machine privileges included. He’d go back to Mal before it came to that.

Jesse packed up his meagre possessions. He’d follow the river south for a while, then thread west to the nearest McDonald’s. Though he ignored it, the dog trotted along beside him. After a few steps, Jesse paused to glower.

‘Go away,’ he said. ‘Leave me alone. I can’t take on a dog.’

The dog stopped, cocked his head, whined a little.

‘I mean it. Get lost,’ Jesse said. He stamped his foot and lunged towards the dog, who retreated fearfully.

Jesse resumed his walk, a bit faster now. The breeze off the river ruffled his hair, the freshness of the air more country than city. He waited several minutes before glancing behind him. The dog stood there, irresolute. Jesse could tell that it wanted to follow, but didn’t quite dare. Jesse didn’t like the way this made him feel – as if he could take the animal’s trust and squeeze it between his fingers like a lump of wet clay.

He almost stumbled over the bird. It lay askew near a tree stump, but as soon as Jesse approached, began to scrabble with its legs, bent wing dragging and sound one flapping. A kestrel, Jesse saw straight off – an adult male with dove-grey tail. It flopped about, trying to escape when he knelt at its side. The dog came over to investigate, thrusting its muzzle at the bird, who reacted by raking the dog with its sharp talons. The dog yowled more in surprise than real injury and skittered away.

‘Leave it be,’ Jesse snapped at the dog.

The dog understood when it was time to ignore a boy, when to obey. It kept its distance.

Jesse looked round. There was no one in sight. With enormous care – he knew just how sharp those talons could be, how strong the beak – he reached for the bird, making a good if quiet imitation of a kestrel's cry: 'kee kee kee.' It no longer struggled to get away, watched instead with an alert tilt of its head, its eyes clear and focused. It was not ready to relinquish its hunter's fierce proud spirit. But before long another animal would maul it, or a passing kid drown it – or worse.

'Come, Windhover,' Jesse said. 'You can trust me. Let's see if we can help you fly.'

Head tilted and ears cocked, the dog waited with frank curiosity to see if a meal or a miracle would be forthcoming.

Jesse grasped the kestrel in both hands, firmly pinioning its wings. He rose, brought the bird to chest level, and closed his eyes. The bird's heart fluttered beneath his fingers, and Jesse waited until the warmth of his palms, the timbre of his thoughts calmed the frightened creature. There is no healing through subjugation. Then Jesse moves like a line of melody through its body, lingering longest over the broken bones in its wing. Cells resonate as note called out to note. The air is still: the stir of wind has died away, leaving only the scent of pine in its wake.

The dog raised its head and sniffed. It could identify the peppery richness of new-mown grass, the hot iron bite of fresh pitch, the oily slick of riverbird, the fruity tang of another dog's urine – all the manifold but familiar odours of river and city. And then this new thing: the boy, suddenly different. The dog would have liked to bark but contented itself with a low rumble in its throat, hardly a growl. Jesse opened his eyes for a moment and flicked a look of reproach at the dog, who hung its head.

Ten minutes, twenty, an hour; or no time at all. As always, the whentide ebbs till the creature begins to struggle. Then it was done – bones healed, and the kestrel released to flight. Jesse smiled as it met the air with vigorous wingstrokes, skimming the water until it reached the middle of the river. There it hovered into the rising wind, then banked and flew in a steep climb. The higher it flew, the bigger it seemed to grow – the stronger its wings. Jesse followed its path with a hand shading his eyes, for the clouds had parted and he was staring almost directly into the sun, which tipped the kestrel with redgold. A single wild cry split the air: no elegy's minor key. Engulfed in flame, the bird passed from sight.

Jesse watched for a while longer. The kingfishers were chasing each other over the river. Their small, brilliantly-coloured bodies darted and flashed, embroidering the rippling length of greygreen silk. There was a moment in their flight, just before they dived, when they paused, suspended – the wave at cresting, the pendulum at the top of its arc – and then with a shiver, as if time itself had hesitated, resumed their plunge.

Eventually hunger intruded. Jesse sighed, flipped his hair out of his eyes, and forced himself to turn away. The river would wait. He shouldered his rucksack and continued in the direction of the city centre. Tired and dispirited, he trudged along the narrow footpath. The kestrel had drained whatever energy his short, troubled night and inadequate supper had

provided. His usual craving for chocolate nagged at him. After McDonald's, he decided, he'd spend the morning in the library, then try to find some work, maybe in one of the posh residential neighbourhoods – mowing, weeding, painting, window cleaning, anything.

The dog had waited before following the boy. Gradually it crept closer, but not too close. When the boy stopped to lean on the back of a concrete bench, the dog stopped as well, watching wistfully.

Jesse took a deep breath, lifted his head, and saw the dog.

'You again,' Jesse said.

The dog's persistence irritated him. What would he do with a dog? Most days he didn't even know where he'd find his own next meal. A dog would make him stand out, far too noticeable. And shackled: he didn't want any creature's loyalty or devotion. He picked up a stone from the ground.

'I'm warning you,' he called. 'Go away.'

The stupid dog came a few steps nearer.

'I don't want to hurt you. But I will if you don't leave me alone.'

The dog moved forward another inch.

'That's it,' Jesse said.

The rock landed on the dog's flank. The dog yelped and jumped back, then slunk away. At the same time a voice shrieked in rage. Before Jesse could turn to see who had shouted, something – someone – rushed at him and knocked him flat. He covered his head with his arms as fists pounded at his shoulders, pulled his hair, pinched his upper arms. After a bit he realised that not much damage was actually being done. He sat up, pushed his assailant away. Right. A girl.

'What do you think you're doing?' Jesse asked her.

She sprang to her feet and picked up another rock.

'I'll throw it at you. See how you like that,' she spat.

Jesse couldn't help laughing. Her brown eyes blazed at him, fierce with indignation. She was about his own age, with a long mane of chestnut hair escaping from a thick elastic. A fraction shorter than him, and very wiry. He had the impression that she was a ballet dancer – something about the way she stood, moved. She was dressed in shiny blue Lycra shorts and crop top, white trainers – typical classy jogging gear – and her face was flushed and filmed with sweat.

'Go on, then, throw it,' Jesse said from the ground. 'Hit a man when he's down.'

'Some man,' she said with a snort. She dropped the rock.

The dog in its perversity, in its doggy cunning, came prancing up. Tail wagging, it began jumping up on Jesse to lick his hands and face.

'Your dog is more faithful than you deserve,' she said.

'It's not my dog.'

'He doesn't seem to know that,' she said.

'It keeps following me,' Jesse said.

'I see. So that's a good reason to throw rocks at him, is it?'

'Not rocks. One rock.'

'As if that makes any difference,' she retorted.

'I daresay it does, to the dog,' Jesse said calmly.

The girl regarded him with a puzzled look on her face.

'Who are you?' she asked.

Jesse stood. He brushed himself off, picked up his rucksack.

'Ring the RSPCA, will you.'

'You haven't answered my question.'

'Nor do I intend to,' Jesse answered. 'What business is it of yours?'

'You're not from here,' said the girl. She took a step closer, her head tilted at a graceful angle. Again he was reminded of a dancer.

'So? That's no crime.'

This had gone on long enough. Jesse turned to leave. She laid her hand on his arm. Flinching, he jerked from her grasp and walked away.

'Wait,' she called.

He was determined not to stop. The girl ran round in front of him, blocking his path. He would have brushed past her but something in the set of her shoulders, her mouth made him hesitate.

'Please wait,' she said again.

They looked at each other for a while in silence.

'Are you hungry?' she finally asked.

And if she noticed the sweat that sprang up on his forehead when she handed him the muesli bar from her bum bag, she was considerate enough not to say.

Chapter 2

At first they walked back towards the Old Bridge in silence, which was exactly how Jesse wanted it. But the girl had the kind of energy that, like the river itself, would not easily be diverted.

‘My name’s Sarah.’

‘Jesse,’ he offered in exchange for the forthcoming meal.

‘Where did you spend the night?’

Jesse shrugged.

‘You look like you’ve slept under a bridge.’

He gave her a mocking half-smile and pointed towards the Old Bridge.

She was shocked but tried to conceal it. Studying her surreptitiously, he wondered exactly how old she was. With her face so expressive, it was hard to tell. She wouldn’t make a good liar: that smile would give her away, those eyes. There was something about her ...

Just before they passed under the bridge, Sarah stopped and gazed up at the stone parapets.

‘Not a good place to sleep,’ she said.

‘There’s worse,’ Jesse said.

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Why? It’s a handsome structure. Look at the curved coping stones above the spandrels and wing walls. And the projecting courses at road level. All good solid features typical of the period.’

Sarah was astonished. ‘You know a lot about it.’

‘Not really. Just from my reading.’

She indicated the stone dogs guarding both ends of the parapets with bared teeth. ‘They scare me.’

‘They’re only statues.’

‘Maybe ...’ She shook her head. ‘There are too many legends about this bridge. It’s supposed to be unlucky. That’s why a lot of people won’t use it. You wouldn’t get me to spend a night here, alone, for anything.’

Jesse teased her. ‘How do you know I was alone?’

She blushed easily. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean ... I mean, I didn’t mean to ...’ A futile attempt to hold back a peal of amusement. ‘I’m getting myself all twisted up over nothing, aren’t I?’

He liked her willingness to laugh at herself. ‘I was alone.’

‘All the more reason to find someplace else to sleep.’

‘I can look after myself.’

Her eyes took him in from head to foot, not missing much. ‘Listen, it’s really not a good place to hang out – not alone, and especially not at night. There’ve been several murders underneath the bridge. Just last year someone found the body of a man who’d been beaten to death and left on the bank.’

‘All old buildings – or bridges – have their history.’

‘Not like this one,’ she persisted. ‘My mother says some places are imbued with spiritual energy.’

‘Ghosts?’ he scoffed.

‘No ... *no*, nothing like that. More like a fingerprint, a kind of emotional charge because a person – or maybe an animal – burned so strongly that everything, even stone, remembers.’

Her clear gaze unsettled him, as if she understood a secret about him. Her scent sprang out at him, clawing at the base of his throat. His grandmother had hung large bunches of lavender in the kitchen to dry, but he’d never met a *girl* who liked it, a girl like this, and that unsettled him even more. Go, he told himself. Just turn around and leave. There are worse things than hunger. His stomach growled in disagreement, loud enough for her to hear. He hitched his rucksack higher on his shoulder and rubbed his midriff; caught her grin. He could never resist the absurdity of a situation, even his own. His lips twitched, then turned up at the corners.

On the other side of the bridge the dog plunged into the river, paddled in exuberant circles for a few minutes, then bounded back to Jesse and shook itself vigorously.

‘Shit!’ Jesse exclaimed. ‘My clothes were disgusting enough already.’ He glared at the dog.

But Sarah was looking back at the bridge, unable to let it go. ‘It reeks of evil.’

‘That’s a bit strong, I should think.’

‘Don’t be so sure. One of my mum’s –’ She hesitated, then started again. ‘One of my mother’s acquaintances killed herself there not too long ago. She threw herself into the river and drowned.’ Jesse heard the faint emphasis on the word *acquaintances*. He wondered what she wasn’t telling him, but had no intention of trespassing on restricted territory. He had enough landmines of his own.

He smiled, making it easier for her. ‘I’m not going to throw myself off any bridge, haunted or not. Anyway, I’d never drown.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m too good a swimmer.’

Sarah glanced at him. Jesse’s eyes danced, but his voice was quiet and assured. If anybody else had spoken like that, she’d have sniggered or told him off. This was different, somehow. She had a strong feeling that this lad didn’t brag, didn’t lie – that in fact he had no *need* to lie. But she knew the bridge. And her mother.

The house was an old and beautiful one, set back from a quiet road on the outskirts of the city. Perched on a hilly prospect with unencumbered views, it had been built perhaps two hundred years ago of local stone. Its exterior walls were a mottled but mellow ochre, like the best vanilla ice cream. A clever architect had brought light and river into what must have once been a dark, even cramped interior. Now it was spacious, sunny, and very untidy.

Jesse had been on street for a few months, yet thought he could still imagine other people’s lives – ordinary people, who lived in flats and houses, who got up in the morning and bathed and ate breakfast and kicked the dog

(or the youngest family member) and left for work or school. But entering Sarah's home, he needed a passport and phrase book.

At the front door he noticed three motorcycle helmets hanging up along with the macs and jackets.

'My dad's,' she said.

Jesse was astounded by the quantity of possessions these people could accumulate: magazines and newspapers, sandals, pillows, vases filled with wilted flowers, CDs, a heap of socks, African baskets, photos, a trumpet lying on a piano, plants, a chess set, statues in stone and wood – and *books*, lots and lots of books. And this only from a glimpse through the doorway as they headed towards the kitchen.

Sarah passed Jesse a plate heaped with scrambled eggs and grated cheese, grilled tomatoes, buttery toast. The dog had already wolfed down a helping of stale cornflakes with milk.

'He'd probably sit up and recite all of the *Elder Edda* – in the original – for a soup bone,' Jesse said.

'My mum and I are vegetarians,' Sarah said without a hint of apology. 'No bones, no bacon or sausage, only some steaks for my dad in the deep freeze. Finn would kill me if I used his imported beef for a dog.'

'Finn?'

'My dad.'

'A nickname?'

'No. An old family name.'

'You call your father by his first name?'

'Yeah, why not?' She looked at him in surprise, then asked, 'What's the *Elder Edda*?'

'A collection of early ballad-like poems. An important source of the Norse myths, written in Old Icelandic.'

'Norse?'

'Yeah. You know, stories of the Viking gods. Odin. Thor. The Valkyries. Loki the Trickster's one of my favourites.'

She stared at him for a moment with a frown, as if she'd never heard of the Vikings, before going to the refrigerator for another packet of cheese.

'Your dog won't mind some cheddar, I reckon.'

Sarah persisted in calling the dog his. Jesse hadn't bothered to correct her again. A meal was worth more than a pronoun. If he played his declensions right, he might get to shower as well.

While Sarah cut some cheese Jesse concentrated on the tastes exploding on his tongue. Hunger sharpened the senses – everyone knew that. Only the truly hungry saw the ghosts it raised: a grandmother cooking on an old range, a little girl setting a basket of warm feathery eggs on the table, the sad tired eyes of the constable. Sarah noticed how Jesse's eyes caught the light as he raised them from his plate. They winked like mirrors, or deep blue pools, full of hidden and subtle layers of colour.

'Would you like some coffee?' Sarah asked.

'Please.'

Sarah liked that he was polite, that he ate slowly and thoughtfully even though he was clearly ravenous.

Sarah sat across from him while the dog lay at their feet, licking up crumbs. The coffee was hot and strong and utterly delicious. Sarah took hers black, but Jesse added sugar, lots of sugar, and a dollop of cream from the jug she'd set before him. Though they'd stopped talking, the silence was not strained or uncomfortable.

When he'd finished the eggs, Sarah rose and prepared a second batch without asking, and two more slices of toast. He ate everything. Sarah offered him more coffee, but he refused. He could feel some pressure against the sides of his skull, a mild fogginess. Though coffee could sometimes relieve his headaches, more often it triggered a debilitating migraine. He'd been lucky in recent months. Perhaps he was only overtired. But what would he do if he had a full-fledged attack?

Sarah poured herself another mug. Her fingers were not particularly long or fine – nails short and blunt – but her hands carved a line of melody through the air. Reminded of a CD Liam used to play, Jesse hummed a few bars of Stravinsky's *Firebird*. Sarah finished the phrase for him.

'I've danced to that,' she said.

'So you do dance,' he said. 'I wondered.'

She swirled the coffee in her mug, a private smile on her face.

'What?' he asked.

'You're not at all what I expected.'

Jesse noticed the faint sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose, the flecks of green in her eyes. He looked away when she became aware of his scrutiny. The kitchen was warm, and despite the coffee Jesse was beginning to feel drowsy.

'Do you want to lie down?' Sarah asked. 'I don't mind.'

Jesse played with his fork, considering.

'You shouldn't be so trusting,' he said. 'It's dangerous.'

She laughed, deep and throaty.

'There's a spare bedroom upstairs which has a bath en suite. You're welcome to use it. I'll make up the bed for you.'

'I can do that myself. You don't have to wait on me.'

'It's OK this time. You're tired.'

She narrowed her eyes, measuring him.

'There's probably some old stuff of my –' She broke off and took a breath. 'Some old stuff we've still got that will fit you. We can put your clothes in the washing machine.'

'Won't he object?'

'Who?'

'Your father.'

Her laugh again. 'He wouldn't even notice. Anyway, he's on the top of some mountain in the Andes on another of his expeditions.'

'Expedition?' This was getting more interesting.

'Don't be so nosy,' Sarah said, but with a grin. She relented. 'He's a photographer. Does a lot of nature assignments. You know, like *National Geographic*. Unless you're a new kind of moss or mollusc or mineral, you're just another teenage body. You could be wearing a dinner jacket over a

thong, with feather boa to match, and he wouldn't turn a hair. He lives in jeans and T-shirts, which he orders in bulk from the internet. Except when he's in his biker's mode, when he dons black leather and chains.'

'Now you're trying to wind me up,' he protested.

'Well ... only a bit. If you get to meet Finn, you'll see what I mean.'

'Is he gone for long?'

'Depends. Why? Are you planning to rob us or just move in?'

Jesse shook his head in irritation. 'You really need to be more careful.'

'You don't know my mother,' was all Sarah would say.

After showing him the bathroom, Sarah handed Jesse a comb and hairbrush as well as a wrapped toothbrush, then carried off his dirty clothes and sleeping bag without a sign of disgust, for which he was grateful. Now he lay down with a sigh of pure bliss, skin tingling from the long hot shower and scented by the lavender skin cream which Sarah had offered him. 'I make it myself.' His hair had lightened at least two shades. The old T-shirt and boxers fitted well enough, though they were a size smaller than he normally wore. He *had* lost weight in recent months. The dog was curled up on the brightly patterned bedside mat. Though Jesse always read himself to sleep no matter where he kipped, his eyes were too heavy for print. He was asleep within minutes.

Despite his exhaustion, he sleeps fitfully. Darkness eddies uncertainly around him. Voices whisper. Faces appear and disappear. Figures cry out in agony, and flail their arms, and sink beneath the waves. A red sun blisters the sea, blinding Jesse, burning him. Wait, he calls. Hold on, I'm coming. But the water rejects him, tosses him roughly from image to image, until sleep finally ebbs and leaves him stranded on a strange shingle.

In the curtained light, red starbursts snagged the edge of his vision like thorns, and he closed his eyes again with a groan. His stomach heaved in protest. Lines of fire zigzagged under his lids. His fingertips felt numb, and he worked his hands under the duvet, bunched and tangled around his body. After a few minutes, the nausea subsided enough for him to stand. He needed to pee.

The house was quiet. The dog followed Jesse along the landing, which was decorated with a series of luminous black-and-white photographs of seashells so real that Jesse felt he could reach out and pick them up in his hands. He stopped to examine them. If this were her father's work, he was good – *much* better than good. Jesse whistled softly under his breath. Sarah was lucky.

Jesse found a note on the kitchen table: *Gone out. Help yourself to what you need. Don't wake my mum. S.* He opened the refrigerator. He was not used to so much food at once; he'd eaten too many eggs. He drank half a glass of milk, hoping it would settle his stomach. The clock ticking on the wall told him that he'd not slept long. The dog looked up at him expectantly and Jesse poured it some milk. The dog's eager tongue slapped against Jesse's ears. He shivered a little. His gut ached, and there was a heaviness behind his temples, a stiffness in his neck that warned him of worse to come.

He needed to pack his things and go.

'Are you a friend of Sarah's?'

Jesse whirled at the voice. A woman stood in the doorway, regarding him with curiosity but without alarm. He could see the resemblance to Sarah straightaway – not in the colouring, for her mother had deep red hair and the most amazing eyes he had ever seen, the smoky amber of the animal kingdom. Her face was very pale, and at first he thought she must be ill. Then he realised that her skin crackled with energy, as if an electric current were racing under its translucent surface. The line of her eyebrows, the shape of her nose, the curve of her lips, her cheekbones: all had been replicated in Sarah.

'I'm Jesse Wright,' he said, feeling rather awkward. 'Sarah invited me for a meal.'

She glanced down at the dog, who retreated behind Jesse, uttering an odd little yip. Nearly as gracefully as her daughter, she bent and stroked its head, then went to take some things from the cupboard.

'There's a herbal tea I use that should settle your stomach,' she said, filling the kettle.

'How did you know –' Jesse began.

'About the nausea?' She smiled. 'Sit down. I'll massage your neck and shoulders while you drink. It'll help. Perhaps we can forestall the migraine.'

He intended to refuse – politely – but found himself taking the chair she indicated.

'Not my shoulders and back. Please don't touch them,' he said. 'Just the top of my neck, the base of my skull.'

She agreed without questioning him.

Her fingers were cool and competent, kneading the knots of tension while he sipped the tea. It had been so long since someone had touched him except in anger – that he had *allowed* someone touch him. Liam had been the last. Jesse closed his eyes, listening to the tune she hummed under her breath. The room was warm, warm as the musky tea, warm as the song, warm as sleep. Water lapped at his temples, pushed at the locks of his mind. Behind him lay the past. Far behind. He drifted, warm and relaxed.

Jesse lay in bed. He threw off the covers and padded barefoot to the window, twitched back the curtain. He must have slept a few hours this time, for the sky had hazed over once more, but he could tell that it was around noon. He opened the window and breathed deeply. His headache was gone, and the air was muggy, saturated with the mingled scent of noonday heat and incipient rain, honeysuckle and late roses and lavender and blackcurrant, so potent that he could feel the gravel underfoot on the path through his grandmother's garden, taste the jam she'd be making.

He tried to remember how he'd got back to the bedroom. He had a clear picture of Sarah's mother in the kitchen, brewing him a mug of pungent herbal tea, then massaging his neck and temples, but after that – nothing. Surely she couldn't have carried him upstairs, even if he'd drifted off to sleep. He was wearing jeans: had he dreamt it after all, and somehow

dressed himself without being aware of it? Some form of sleepwalking, perhaps.

'You're awake,' a voice called up from below.

Trowel in hand, Sarah's mother stood by a tangled flowerbed. Her hair was tied back from her face, but like her daughter's, it was fast escaping. The dog was sprawled completely at home under a large walnut tree, which sported a handsome if somewhat lopsided treehouse, complete with shingled roof and a shuttered window.

'What time is it?' Jesse asked, more for something to say than because he wanted to know.

'Just before one,' she said. 'Come down to the kitchen for lunch. I was about to stop now anyway. It's beginning to rain.'

Frenzied barking, a streak of fur followed by a canine missile.

'Come back here!' Jesse shouted.

Meg laughed. 'He'll never get our neighbour's wily tom. That animal has at least ninety-nine lives.'

'How did I get upstairs?' Jesse asked her over a grilled cheese-and-tomato sandwich and fresh lemonade.

'You don't remember?' she asked. 'It can take some people like that.'

'What takes some people like that?'

'The tea, the massage.'

'Rubbish.' Jesse narrowed his eyes. 'Unless you drugged the tea ...?'

She laughed, her voice light and frothy like the heads of elderflowers growing wild along the lanes of his childhood.

'Of course not. It's just a little technique I use for headaches. It works too, doesn't it? I led you upstairs, helped you into bed. You'll probably remember after a while.' She looked at him, her eyes thoughtful. 'But you're particularly receptive. A sensitive, I should think.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know what you mean.'

Her mouth crimped slightly at one corner. Jesse had the feeling that she understood him very well indeed and was amused by his prevarication. Abruptly he changed the subject. 'Where's Sarah?'

'Gone to do some errands. She'll be back soon.'

'I'll wait to say goodbye.'

'Where will you go?'

Again he shrugged. 'I'm following the river.'

'For the summer?'

'More or less.'

'If you want to take a break -' She hesitated and bit her lip. It was the first time he'd seen her at a loss, and suddenly he anticipated her next words.

'No!' he snapped. 'I don't need a job.' Stupid, he thought. These people would pay well. A day or two couldn't hurt, could it? A few pounds put aside, a couple of new books, maybe even a second-hand jumper and a warm anorak for the winter ... Sarah's face flashed across his mind. He pushed back his chair and stood, upsetting his glass of lemonade.

'Sorry,' he said as he hurried to the sink.

'Not a job,' Sarah's mother said. 'A refuge.'

He stared at her, cloth in hand. He could hear the loud ticking of the ceramic clock on the wall.

She quoted quietly:

*'Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.'*

'You've been going through my things!' Jesse said.

Her smile was patient. 'I wouldn't do that. None of us would. *The Tempest* is one of my favourite plays. I acted in it at university.'

'Sorry,' he muttered again, not entirely reassured. The very play that he was reading now, and some of his own favourite lines. Experience had taught him to mistrust coincidence.

She rose and began to clear the table.

'Thanks for lunch,' he said, moving to help her.

'Leave it,' she said. 'You and Sarah can do supper, if you're still here.'

She stopped, the jug in her hand.

'Think about it, Jesse. A few days of rest. I think you need it.'

Her words splashing over the rocky bed of his mind, Jesse dug his hands into his pockets and walked out into the garden. Sarah's mother watched him go, a troubled expression on her face.

Chapter 3

Sarah had bought the dog a sturdy leather collar and lead. 'He's going to need a tag and chip, his shots. And what about his name?'

'I told you,' Jesse said. 'It's not my dog.'

'He is now,' she said. 'What do you want to call him?'

Jesse shrugged. There wasn't much point thinking up a name unless Sarah's family would be willing to adopt the dog.

'How about Anubis? We did Egyptian mythology last year in school.'

No way, thought Jesse. Even if he named the animal – temporarily, mind you – it would be *Harry* or *Jinx*. Simple, ordinary, doggy.

The dog tugged on the lead, anxious to keep moving. They'd walked down the hill from Sarah's house and were now in another part of the city. The townhouses were neat, upmarket, with little front gardens, geranium-filled window boxes displayed like medals on a war hero's chest, and brightly painted doors and window frames.

Sarah indicated a narrow lane almost hidden between two brick dwellings. 'Come on, I want to show you something.'

She led him along the cobbled way towards a small stone chapel which had been converted into a residence and workshop. A stone bench curved round the base of a towering chestnut tree. Mounted on the scrolls of the wrought iron gate was an exquisitely hand-lettered sign: *Sundials*, it said. They stopped and leant on the fence while Jesse studied the pieces, each bathed in the astringent green light. Once again he could smell the flush of lavender on Sarah's skin.

'Brilliant, aren't they?' Sarah asked.

'They're wonderful,' Jesse said. 'Who makes them?'

'A friend of my mother's. She's not here at the moment, or we could say hello.'

Jesse pointed to a gilded greenslate sundial mounted on a plinth and set some distance from the others. 'That's the only one standing in the sun.'

'Ursula's partner wanted to remove the tree so visitors could appreciate the sundials better, but Ursula wouldn't hear of it. Most of these are only display pieces, though I think one or two might be current orders.'

'Sundials have to be calibrated for a specific site in order to be accurate.'

'You *do* read a lot, don't you?'

He appeared not to hear. 'Isn't she afraid someone might steal them?'

'They're far too heavy.'

'Anyone could hop over this fence and vandalise them.'

'More tempting stuff to go after, I suppose.' She gave him a sideways glance. 'Do you always expect the worst?'

'It's best to be prepared.'

Automatically he groped in his pocket for a cigarette, but came up only with an empty matchbox.

'You smoke?' Sarah asked, more observant than Jesse was used to – more, perhaps, than he cared for.

'Sometimes. Did Ursula make the one in your garden?'

'Yeah. My mother spent hours arguing with her about the design. She can be a right pain in the you-know-what sometimes – my mum, I mean.'

'Your mother's a very interesting woman.'

'That's what everyone says,' Sarah said drily.

Jesse turned his gaze away from the sundials.

'There are many different kinds of gifts,' he said, then shook his head and ran his hand back and forth over the scrollwork on the gate. 'Sorry, that was really dumb of me. I hate such platitudes.' He continued to rub at the metal with a fingertip, his whole attention concentrated on erasing his words.

'It's OK. I genuinely admire her. Like her, too. It's just that ...'

'Yeah, I can imagine.'

Sarah studied his face for a moment without speaking. When he wasn't frowning, his features had the soft look of an old pair of jeans, familiar and comfortable and worn. Like someone you might have known forever. Even his eyes, when they shed their brittle layer of mica, turned the colour of her favourite stonewashed denim. There was no stubble on his face, but she could tell that he'd soon be shaving.

He turned his head and met her eyes. Caught off guard, she flushed.

'Look, I didn't mean to compare you to your mother,' Jesse said. 'Or to pry.'

'Oh yeah?'

'OK, maybe I *am* a bit curious,' he conceded. 'Do you blame me?'

Sarah had a mischievous glint in her eyes, the same look he'd seen on a small girl who'd found a stash of chocolate and a single disintegrating cigarette hidden under his mattress. On Emmy. He didn't notice that he was biting his lip till he tasted a trace of blood.

'I'll offer you a trade,' Sarah said. 'One fact about yourself for one about my mum.'

'It wouldn't be a fair exchange,' he said curtly. 'There's nothing worth learning about me.'

He walked away, leaving Sarah to stare after him. His shoulders were hunched as if against a chill wind.

Sarah led them through a cemetery where she stopped to point out a row of small graves whose headstones all bore inscriptions dating from as far back as the 1890s. Though not quite overgrown, the plots were no longer carefully tended, and the sweet smell of the honeysuckle which clambered rampantly through a nearby lilac added to the slight air of neglect.

'I don't know why,' she said, 'but I always like to take this detour. You'd think the sight of these tiny graves would be sad, but it's not. In a strange way they're like children I've met. Sometimes they even seem to be whispering to me. Comforting me when things go wrong, or I'm just lonely and depressed.' She pointed to a crooked headstone at the end of the row. 'Amelia Holland. She was four and a half when she died. I feel as if I know

her best. She'd have become a teacher, I think.' She looked up to see that Jesse's face was set in stone. 'Sorry, it's silly, I suppose.'

Jesse shook his head but said nothing. Then he moved away towards the honeysuckle. Head bent, he plucked a handful of blossoms from the vine and crushed them between his fingers, releasing their scent. Without understanding what was the matter, Sarah could tell that she'd made a misstep, that she was encroaching on hallowed ground in some way.

She tried to make amends. 'It's just that it's very peaceful here. Sometimes I bring a book and read.'

Jesse flicked the crushed petals away and brushed his hand off on his jeans.

'It's getting late,' he said. 'Let's go see this park you say is so amazing.'

'Hedgerider Park.'

Jesse lifted an eyebrow.

'That's its name.' She looked down at the dog, who was lying in a patch of sunlight. 'Come on, Anubis.' She grinned. 'Nubi.'

As they walked along, Jesse stole an occasional sidelong glance at Sarah, but either she was unaware of his curiosity, or most likely indifferent to it. A girl like this, he reminded himself, would have no reason to lack self-confidence: intelligent, a privileged only child, plenty of money, decent (OK, *fascinating*) family, scores of friends, boyfriend too probably, herself nice enough to look at it though nothing special really – way too thin, too angular, ropy with muscle, even if she *did* have nice eyes, and that long gleaming hair, and he liked the way her mouth crept slowly upwards in amusement as though she'd found a hoard of beautiful polished stones like the ones he kept in a soft leather pouch and Emmy's eyes shine, her mouth spreads in a wide astonished smile when he gives them to her for her birthday, 'jewels,' she breathes, 'my own jewels' ...

Nubi made a choking sound in his throat. Jesse started, he must have tugged too hard on the lead. He slackened his grip, then slowed to catch his breath while he tried to work out why he was still here. His headache was all but gone; his stomach was full; and the sky had cleared. There was no reason to remain, and a lot of reasons to move on. From the outset he'd established an ironclad rule never to stay more than one night in the same place.

Sarah looked at him in concern. 'Should we get a coke or something?'

He shook his head and strode ahead. It was better to keep going. Sarah called out to turn left, and they rounded the corner into a world he knew all too well.

A knot of lads – hardly older than kids – were crowded round an object on the pavement. Jesse stopped short. At first he thought they had an animal, a dog or a cat, or even a large sack of spoils, which they were prodding and kicking and sniggering over. Then he heard the sobs and the pleading, and his headache exploded behind his temples, along with his memories. The boy was doing exactly the wrong thing by begging. They would finish him off if he didn't shut up fast. Maggots fed on soft flesh.

There were about six or seven of them, and Jesse spotted the ringleader straightaway: a tall lad with a shaved head, smooth sallow face, and very white teeth. He was standing at the kerb with his arms crossed, enjoying his

handiwork without getting his own hands dirty. His eyes glittered with intelligence, and Jesse had the feeling the guy was so stoked on his own power that he had no need of other stimulants. In different circumstances, he'd easily have been headed for a career in politics.

It was a party. Music was blaring from a ghetto blaster, and several of the kids had tins of lager in one hand, though they were certainly underage. Nobody would dare to challenge them. Jesse could smell that particular kind of hot sour sweat which a gang exudes when pumped on drink and adrenaline and bloodlust – on sheer strength of numbers – as well as the stink of urine. The poor bugger had pissed himself. He didn't stand a chance.

Sarah came up behind Jesse and exclaimed when she saw what was taking place. She gripped him by the arm, and this time he merely winced when she dug her fingers into his flesh. The dog retreated the full length of its lead, sensing trouble. Jesse grabbed her arm and dragged her backwards while she tried to fight him off.

'Let go of me,' she said. 'We've got to do something.'

Jesse looked round. Far down the street an elderly man was scurrying out of sight into a doorway. A couple of girls were giggling at the next crossing, and casting curious glances at Sarah and him to see if the show was about to get really interesting. Anyone else who might have been prepared to help had disappeared or was keeping a low profile. Even the traffic seemed to have taken an alternate route. Jesse grasped Sarah's arm tighter and slowly hauled her back around the corner before the fuckheads had a chance to notice them. For the moment their attention was still focused on their prey. All except the tall bloke, who had seen them right enough. He'd narrowed his eyes and was cupping his chin with his hand and tapping one long forefinger against his lips, as if weighing the pros and cons of the latest tax proposal.

'Keep quiet,' Jesse hissed at Sarah. She was a city brat. Didn't she have any more sense than this? She must know when to cut and run.

Her face was blotched with rage, and she was shaking so hard that she could barely spit out a coherent sentence.

'Bastard. Get off. Take your fucking hands off. Right now. *Now.*'

'No.'

She tried to pull away, kicked him, and swung her other arm for his head. She was strong, but he held on. The dog whined and ran round them, tangling his lead about their legs.

Jesse waited until her first fury had passed. 'It's got nothing to do with us.'

'Fuck that.'

'I'm not getting involved in someone else's fight.'

'What's the matter with you? You can't just walk away. There are six or eight of them. They're going to put him in hospital.'

'No, they're more likely to kill him.'

'And that's it? You don't care?'

'It happens.'

'Not if I can help it,' Sarah said.

'You can't do anything. *We* can't. Now let's get out of here before they invite us to join their little party.'

He flinched at the contempt in her eyes but held his ground. Her eyes filled with tears.

'Have you got a mobile?' he asked with a sigh.

'At home. Forgot to charge it.'

He shrugged. 'Let's go.'

'I'm going back there.'

'Then you're on your own.'

He released her arm. They stared at each other in silence. Jesse could still hear music and laughter coming from around the corner, but his head was throbbing, and it took all his concentration to deal with Sarah. The sun was hot, and the smell of sweltering tarmac and exhaust was making him nauseous and a touch dizzy. Jesse remembered what Sarah's mum had said to him – had offered him. It had sounded so tempting. A chance to rest. To read. To *sleep*. To figure out where to go, what to do. But it would never work. These people were fools. They seemed to think you could change the world. And what did they want with him anyway? The whole set-up stank worse than a backed-up public convenience. Maybe he was a new kind of school project: get to know the disadvantaged in the summer holidays. Stuff that. He didn't need their philanthropy. Which amounted to what? A few meals, some old clothes they'd have sent to Oxfam before the month was out.

He didn't owe them anything. If Sarah insisted on acting heroic, on getting hurt, he'd find his way back up the hill on his own, he supposed. Stupidly, he'd left his stuff at their house. But he could be there and gone in an hour. Or less.

His headache was making it difficult for him to think.

He hesitated, waiting to see what Sarah would do. When she didn't move, he unwound the lead from their legs and handed it to her. She took it without a word. He could feel her eyes on his back as he bent to stroke the dog's head. The creature was trembling.

They heard a high thin scream from around the corner, which was suddenly cut off. A burst of loud laughter.

With a wordless oath Sarah flung the lead at Jesse and ran.

'Sarah!' he called after her.

Instead of stopping or looking back she began to run in earnest. Her thick plait swung along behind her, stray tendrils already making their escape. She ran the way an animal runs – fluid, graceful, all its essence distilled in movement. The lasso of her flight dropped over Jesse's shoulders. Tethered, he scooped up Nubi's lead and ran after her.

To his surprise, Jesse found that he couldn't overtake her. She was fast. The sun was still high in the sky, and it beat down upon his head and shoulders. He squinted in the glare from the pavement. Sarah wavered and gradually dwindled before his eyes. He pushed himself harder, faster. Light flashed at him from the metal and glass of the cars, sometimes blinding him. He began to pant. Finally he eased to a walk, then stopped and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Sarah was no longer in sight. He'd lost her. His breathing slowly returned to normal, though his head pounded. He licked

his lips. He could use a cigarette; even better, a cold drink. He fumbled in his pocket. Nothing but a few coins. Again he licked his lips, swallowed. What would happen if he knocked at one of these classy doors and asked for a glass of water? He smiled to himself, imagining the response. Then again, maybe he'd actually get his drink. His clothes were clean and respectable. He had a dog on a very handsome leather lead.

Where *was* Sarah? The city grumbled and shifted around him. He thought of it as a great lumbering beast long inured to the specks of dirt and itching fleas clinging to its hide, probably not even aware of their existence. Jesse looked at the people walking by, seeing them for the first time. The streets weren't overcrowded on this hot summer afternoon, but they weren't empty either. It was unlike him not to have noticed, even more unlike him to outrun his common sense. The street had no tolerance for the weak. And now he had no idea where he was.

Tongue hanging, Nubi – damn it, now he *had* started using that name – waited for Jesse to decide what to do. If only his head would stop pounding...

Jesse stumbled over to the kerb, sat down between two parked cars, and folded his arms across his knees, pillowing his head and closing his eyes. Sweat was still running down his face and chest and armpits, soaking his T-shirt. He could feel Nubi's breath on his neck, then the silly dog's tongue. Only a minute or two, Jesse told himself. He didn't care if anyone gawked, at this point didn't even much care if a driver backed into him. Sarah had duped him. There must be a lesson in this somewhere – a lesson he thought he'd learned years ago. For the first time since Liam he'd let someone invite him home, and he'd been hungry enough – *naive* enough – to go. What had she expected? A noble savage? Gratitude? Now she had run off and left him stranded without his gear, without money, without even a piece of loo paper to wipe his arse. He ought to be angry or disgruntled or something. All he felt was tired.

'Hey mate, y'OK?'

The speaker was dangling his car keys in his hand. Jesse must have drifted off for a moment, because he hadn't noticed the man's approach. Jesse shaded his eyes, nodded, and cleared his throat. He rose and dusted off his jeans – no, Sarah's jumble, he reminded himself – then regarded the man coolly.

'Fine. Just worn out from our jog.' He indicated Nubi with his head.

'Yeah, too hot for a run.' The man looked him up and down. 'Need a lift somewhere?'

Warning bells jangled in Jesse's head.

'Thanks, but we're OK.'

'Are you sure? You look like you could use a cold beer, maybe a fag.'

'I said we're fine.'

'Look, no offence. Just trying to help.' But he took a step closer.

Nubi growled.

The man retreated behind the protection of his car, throwing back over his shoulder, 'Call off your dog, for god's sake. It was a friendly offer. I don't want any trouble.' He jumped into his car and started the engine. Gears clashed as he pulled out of the parking space and drove away.

Jesse scratched Nubi behind his ear.

'You might just earn your keep,' he said. 'Any suggestions what we should do now?'

A cigarette was OK, but Jesse didn't touch anything, not *anything* else.

'Does your dog bite?' a voice behind Jesse asked.

Jesse spun round, then grinned. A girl of about four or five was watching him from her doorstep, with what looked like a dead badger – but probably wasn't – clutched limply in her hand. Behind her the bright blue door stood half open to reveal a black-and-white checked floor and pale yellow wallpaper.

'Only if you bite first,' he said.

Her eyes opened wide, in the solemn unblinking manner of a small child.

'Penny,' called a sharp voice from inside the entrance hall. 'What do you think you're doing? How many times have I got to tell you not to open the front door?'

A young woman appeared on the threshold. Her cheeks coloured when she saw Jesse.

'Oh sorry,' she said in a milder tone. 'I didn't know anyone was there.' Then she remembered caution. 'Penny, you know you're not supposed to talk to strangers.' But she smiled at Jesse over her daughter's head.

'It's OK. You're right to teach her to be careful,' Jesse said.

'The dog was growling,' Penny told her mother.

'At you?' her mum asked, glancing anxiously at Nubi.

'No, nothing like that,' Jesse reassured her. 'Someone tried to –' He looked down at Penny. 'Someone tried to hurt him.'

'Some people.' Penny's mother grimaced. She turned to go, taking her daughter by the hand. 'Well, bye now.'

'You wouldn't happen to have some water for my dog, would you?' Jesse asked on impulse. 'We've been running, and he's very hot.'

'Of course,' she said. 'I'll be right back.' But she closed the door while she fetched a bowl.

'I've brought you a coke,' she said when she returned without her daughter. 'Your face is bright red. You look as if you need it.'

Jesse stammered his thanks, surprised by the kindness. First Sarah and her mum, now this woman. Maybe, just maybe, Sarah only needed to run off her temper.

'Do you know Hedgerider Park?' he asked, holding the ice-cold can to his forehead.

'It's about ten, fifteen minutes from here.'

She gave him directions, while he popped the ring-pull and finished the coke in a few gulps. He couldn't believe how good it tasted.

Sarah was standing at the bay window of an art gallery opposite the park, examining some turbulent cityscapes on display. She looked up with a casual flick of her plait, but Jesse could tell that she'd been watching for him.

'How was I supposed to know you'd come here?' he asked.

She dropped her gaze and muttered, 'Sorry.' After a short pause she raised her head again and smiled, a little abashed. 'I'm not just saying that. I shouldn't have run off and left you. No matter what the reason. It's my wretched temper. Finn's always warning me about it.'

Jesse wasn't accustomed to people who apologised and meant it (or who apologised at all). He wondered if she expected some sort of apology in return. She wouldn't get one, not when he had nothing to be sorry for. He'd stopped telling people what they wanted to hear a long time ago. But he couldn't help returning the smile before mopping his face with his forearm, then his T-shirt, briefly revealing ribs and belly-button, a hint of golden down.

'About that boy –' he began.

Lifting her eyes, Sarah said with a return to her old tone, 'You were dead wrong, you know.'

'And you probably stick your nose in whenever some geeky little kid's being bullied at school!'

'What else? Bullying's foul.'

Jesse suppressed a sigh. 'Can we get some water to drink?'

She nodded and reached out to touch his arm, but he swayed back out of reach. Sarah bit her lip.

'There's a good café nearby,' she said. 'I go there sometimes with a friend. Her parents own this gallery.'

Jesse's face reddened. 'I haven't got any money.'

'I'll pay.'

'I don't want your charity!'

She turned on her heels, and without waiting to see if he followed, swiftly walked away. Head held high, the line of her back reprimanded him.

Chapter 4

'Here. You've been dying for a cigarette, haven't you?' Sarah asked, laying a packet and some matches in front of Jesse.

'Thanks but no thanks,' he said. 'Don't buy me stuff.'

'Let's get one thing straight,' Sarah said, taking her seat again. 'I don't feel sorry for you. And I don't want or need your gratitude. Nor do I have to buy my friendships.'

The café was air-conditioned, and its wooden furniture and terracotta floor and colour scheme, all browns and blacks and creams, told Jesse it had been decorated by someone who read the right magazines. Even the names on the menu had been decorated: *espresso macchiato*, *iced caffè latte*, *chai crème*. Sarah had chosen a milkshake with a frothy description, but Jesse, a small plain coke.

He pushed the cigarettes across the table to Sarah.

'If you're trying to prove a point, it's wasted on me,' she said. 'I'm not impressed by grand gestures, and anyway, they're just some fags. Mates help each other out when they're skint.'

'I'm not your mate.'

'Right. Then don't smoke them for all I care. One of my *mates* will be pleased to have them.'

Jesse's lips twitched. She ought to have inherited the red hair.

'OK,' he said. 'But what about the ban?'

She gaped at him. Capitulation was rarely this swift – it almost made her feel cheated, like her dad she relished a good fight. Jesse continually surprised her, and his mood swings could rival a tempest in sheer strength and unpredictability.

'They look the other way if it's not busy.'

Jesse unwrapped the packet of cigarettes. He was left-handed, his fingers long and fine and articulate like a musician's, and the nails were short and very clean. For someone sleeping rough, he was particular. He inhaled deeply, seemed to be deliberating. When he exhaled, his nostrils flared in pleasure, or secret amusement. Again he inhaled.

'If you inhale like that, you'll end up killing yourself.'

'My lungs are the last thing I've got to worry about.'

'They must be so full of tar that the next time you light a match, they'll burst into flame.'

'Clever,' he said drily.

'If you like fires that much, I can think of better places to start one.'

Something shifted in his eyes, but then he blinked, looked down at the smoke curling from the cigarette in his fingers, and blew on it gently so that the burning tip glowed more fiercely. It must have been a reflection from the fag, Sarah told herself, a trick of the light.

Jesse took another drag on his cigarette – a deep, ostentatious, provocative drag. ‘If you don’t think I ought to smoke, why did you buy them?’

Her mouth turned up at the corner. ‘I thought they might relax you.’

He wafted back a grin of his own. She was quick, he thought, and not without a sense of humour.

His headache had retreated, but he was aware that it lurked on the fringes of his day. The offer that Sarah’s mother had made slid again into his mind. He didn’t have to stay for long, did he? A night, two at most. If he could at least avoid a full-blown migraine, he’d be able to move on with renewed energy. He was so bloody tired.

Sarah signalled to the pimply waiter, who came over straightaway with an ashtray but barely glanced at Jesse. His eyes slithered along Sarah’s body, with the requisite pause at her chest.

‘Can I get you guys something else?’ he asked.

Sarah looked at Jesse, who shook his head.

‘Thanks. Just the bill, please,’ she said as she reached into her shoulder bag for her wallet. The waiter flicked a look of contempt in Jesse’s direction. Jesse stiffened but waited till the bloke was out of earshot.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘you may not want my thanks but you’ve got them, and willingly. I was hungry, tired, dirty. I feel much better now. As soon as you’ve finished your drink, I’d like to go back to your house. I’ll be gone before you begin to regret it.’

Sarah looked towards the waiter, who was busy clearing a table near the kitchen door. ‘Do you really imagine I care what someone like him thinks?’

Jesse had not expected her to be quite so perceptive. ‘It’s got nothing to do with him.’

‘Please. Give me credit for a little intelligence.’

‘OK, not much to do with him. He just showed me a hard truth.’ His gesture managed to convey both bitterness and contempt. ‘I don’t belong here. Not in this posh place, not in your posh house, not in your posh lives. I want to leave as soon as possible.’

‘Where will you go?’

He shrugged. ‘Does it matter?’

Sarah slammed the flat of her hand down on the tabletop so that their glasses jumped. At a nearby table two women with cigarettes between crimson-manicured fingers, carrier bags fawning at their feet, looked up in curiosity. Sarah lowered her voice but spoke no less urgently.

‘Of course it matters. You know how you’re going to end, don’t you?’

‘That’s my problem.’

‘What are you afraid of?’

‘I’m not afraid.’

‘Then stop running.’

A series of pictures flashed through his head: a bed without nightmares; a room where he could close – and bolt – the door any time he chose; music and quiet voices talking; a chess game; a home. Books, endless books. And the time to read them without worrying about the next meal, the next lonely sod or dangerous piece of goods, the police, the rain, the cold. One by one the pictures faded, leaving at first a ghostly afterimage, and then ... nothing.

Once it might have been possible. He had forfeited the right to a normal life long ago. He stared into the bottom of his glass: *running*, she called it. As if anyone could run that fast.

Sarah's next words scared him.

'Mum's already spoken with Social Services.'

Jesse stubbed out his cigarette. He rose.

'Let's go,' he said. 'I want my gear.'

'Jesse –'

He turned his head away. He didn't want her to see the expression in his eyes. Soon after the fire he'd learned it was better not to show his feelings. Sometimes he even stopped feeling them that way. Without a backward glance he hurried through the café.

Jesse was standing by the bike rack where they'd tied Nubi when Sarah joined him.

'You waited,' she said.

'Tell me what your mother said to the Social Services people.'

'Let's go into the park and talk about it.'

'Don't play games with me, Sarah.'

She stared back at him, not in any way cowed. 'You're overreacting.'

'Just talk.'

'Sorry, but I don't think you're headed for a career in Hollywood.' She narrowed her eyes in appraisal, then allowed a grin to flirt with her lips. 'Nope. Forget about it. Plus you're too blond to be a Mafioso.'

It was not like him to waffle so much. When that bastard had hit him for the last time, Jesse had been gone within the hour. And it would have been sooner if he hadn't waited till Mal went out. Jesse would never forget the satisfying sound of all those bottles smashing, the delicate model ships crunching underfoot. Mal had never built anything in his life. The entire collection had been his father's work, but Mal had come to believe his own lies. He'd loved those ships as if he'd laboured over each bit of rigging himself. Pathetic, really. While Angie was at work – usually the night shift – Mal would give the latest woman a proper guided tour. Jesse shivered in spite of the heat. The noise they'd made. Mal hadn't given a damn if Jesse overheard. He'd even been proud of himself, bragged about it, flaunted himself as a *proper man*. Until the next morning when Angie usually found the wrong cigarettes or strands of hair – 'do your tarts have to use *my* hairbrush?' – once even a pair of knickers. Mal had been good at feeling sorry for himself, and grovelling too.

'Come with me,' Sarah urged. 'Just hear me out. I promise not to stop you from leaving if that's what you really want.'

As if she could.

She untied Nubi's lead and ran across the street into the park, the dog leaping at her heels. Jesse hesitated, then set off after her. It would be better to know what was happening with the authorities, he told himself.

As soon as Jesse passed the imposing ivy-covered pillars and descended the steps giving on to a wide gravel path, he felt a prickling sensation along his skin, akin to a mild charge of static electricity. He stopped for a moment to rub his arms, and the feeling passed. Calmly replaiting her hair, Sarah was waiting by a fountain – a massive stone sphinx, her wings spread and

her eyes sharp and predatory – while Nubi drank noisily from the basin. Together they followed the path, which wound in a long sinuous curve and was fretted by mounds of feathery grasses and lavender, interspersed with sharp, angry spikes of red and orange. A distinctive mind had been at work here; the park was astonishing and almost unnerving in its contrasts.

It was much cooler in the shade. The variety of specimens aroused Jesse's curiosity, for most of the trees were mature and couldn't have been planted in recent memory. He supposed a park had stood on this site for many years. Trees had always spoken to Jesse, and he appreciated their disparate characters, their faults: the cockiness of the hazel, needing to compensate for its stature; the stolid slow wit of the oak; and always the beauty and harmony of the willow, whose rooted dance could soothe some of his most turbulent feelings.

Through the branches of an ash, the sun glittered like a finely-cut lead crystal. As the leaves stirred and trembled Jesse glimpsed an ashen face staring back at him from their midst. The notes of a cello floated through the trees, faint but achingly clear. His throat tightened. He had a sudden urge to turn and run, but then the tree swayed and the face was gone. Only an optical illusion, a pattern of sun and shadow fed by his overactive imagination. He'd be seeing ghosts and demons next. But he could still hear the music. He even recognised the piece.

'Where's the music coming from?' he asked Sarah.

'The cello? Somebody's probably busking near the sundial. Lots of street musicians come here, very good ones too.'

'Another sundial?'

'Not just *another* sundial. It's one of the things I want to show you. One of Ursula's best. We're heading in that direction.'

'You were going to tell me about your mother.'

'It can wait.'

'No, it can't.'

Sarah studied his face. How strange, she thought. His eyes had become the deep purple of plums, yet as translucent as shadows on water. She might have been gazing into a pool in an ancient forest, her own face reflected there. And a wilderness of thorns.

Sarah gestured with her hand. 'We can sit down over there,' she said softly.

They came to an open meadow-like area. Scattered haphazardly among the high grass and wildflowers was a series of willow sculptures, each unique in size and shape. And grotesque: a man swallowing a child, its legs still dangling from gnarled lips; a headless figure riding a motorbike. After setting Nubi free, Sarah led Jesse to a bench.

'How old is the park?' Jesse asked.

'It's been here as long as I can remember, but they're always adding or changing something, especially in the last few years. Why?'

'Some of the trees are very old.'

'My dad would probably know more about it. He's involved in some city stuff.'

'Friends in high places?' Jesse was a bit ashamed of the mocking note that crept into his voice.

Sarah reached over and feigned flicking something from Jesse's shoulder, though she was careful not to touch him, not even to come too close.

'What was that about?' he asked.

'Getting rid of the chip.'

'That bad?'

'That bad,' she agreed with a grin.

Nubi was racing round the meadow, chasing a butterfly. The brightly stippled insect darted first left, then right, then climbed steeply out of reach, then dropped in a nosedive to hover just above Nubi's muzzle, then swerved again in a sudden feint and sped away to perch upon a bush and flutter her wings like long curled eyelashes. Nubi came to a halt and gazed at her with adoration, and no little reproach. Why was she taunting him? There was no need to keep fleeing. He barked once. The butterfly flew off, with him in pursuit.

Sarah leaned back against the bench and closed her eyes. The sun was hot and brought a flush of colour, a sheen to her face. Jesse thought how vulnerable the tiny beads of sweat above her upper lip made her look. He had a momentary impulse to wipe them away. He turned his face towards the sound of approaching voices, more disturbed than he cared to admit.

'Sarah! We thought you were still on holiday.'

A girl and three boys carrying skateboards came up to them. The lads wore gaily coloured, baggy shorts; the girl, tight striped shorts, very short, and an even skimpier croptop – she had no qualms about displaying the goods. A market stall, Jesse thought in disgust. Sarah opened her eyes and sat up a little straighter. Her bearing altered subtly, though Jesse would be hard put to describe how. She smiled.

'Hi there,' she said in a lazy drawl.

A lot of talk followed, most of it in a code that Jesse couldn't be expected to crack. He was just thinking of getting up and playing with Nubi when Sarah felt obliged to explain his presence. 'This is Jesse.'

Jesse rose and turned his back on the group. He whistled for Nubi, who came dashing up as if he'd been training for years. Jesse crouched and rubbed the dog behind his ears.

Sarah got the message. Apologetically – sort of – she came over. 'They're going skating. We could join them, if you like.'

'I don't like.'

'Come on, it'll be fun,' she urged.

'I thought there was something you wanted to talk to me about.'

The friends looked at each other. One of them, the girl, spoke in a cultured voice that despite its well-rounded, honeyed vowels bit like a dash of sharp vinegar. 'It's OK, Sarah, we don't want to interrupt anything.'

Jesse felt his hackles rise. Flicking back his hair, he stood to face Sarah's mates. 'You're not interrupting anything. I was just leaving.'

Sarah's colour deepened. She raised her chin. 'Go on,' she said to the four of them. 'We might join you later.'

Jesse was pleased – very pleased – that Sarah had it in her to withstand her friends. He watched with a hint of contempt, his eyes cool and dismissive, as the kids shrugged, made their goodbyes. The girl looked back over her shoulder as they sauntered away.

Sarah crossed her arms. 'You didn't have to be rude.'

'Those are the kind of friends you've got?'

'Since when is it your business who my friends are? You sound like a mother, but not mine, thank god.'

'No, I suppose your mother's too out of it to notice the types you hang around with.'

'Don't you dare insult my mother! She's a wonderful, generous person. You could show a little gratitude, you know.'

'Oh yeah, here it comes. I've been waiting for it – the gratitude bit.'

Sarah chewed her lip. At first she didn't reply. 'Jesse, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that.'

Jesse strode over to the bench to fetch the dog's lead.

'Look, they're mates from school, that's all,' Sarah said. 'Kids you see in the canteen, kids to go to a film or drink a coke with. Not worth fighting about.'

'I think you'd better tell me about the call to Social Services.'

'Why are you so anxious about that call? Have you murdered someone?' She was still laughing when she realised that his face had blanched. He gripped the back of the bench with both hands.

'Jesse –'

He looked up, his eyes pleading and frightened, a small child's eyes, clear sapphire, brimming with the *no no no no* that the world is supposed to listen to but never does. Sarah stifled a cry and took a step backwards.

'Go,' he said, when he could finally speak. 'Please. Just go away and leave me alone.'

Sarah turned and went.

Half an hour later, Jesse was still sitting on the willow bench, back hunched, head in his hands and Nubi at his feet. There was no point in just sitting here, yet he couldn't bring himself to do anything else. He didn't even want a cigarette. He tried to think where he should go.

'Jesse.'

Jesse looked up. Sarah stood with the sun behind her so that he couldn't make out the expression on her face. The light was warm and liquid, dripping redgold highlights onto her chestnut hair. She held out a bag.

'Indian takeaway. I hope you like curry.'

'Yeah.' He gazed at her. He had no idea what else to say.

'Come on, then. I know the perfect picnic spot.'

The small cornfield was hidden behind a stand of trees. Sarah pushed her way into the tall heads, fresh and colourful and heavy with ripening seed. Jesse sneezed once, then a second time. The sound was unexpectedly loud, and both of them giggled as if they were six years old and raiding the biscuit tin. As they tunnelled through the leafy grain they were completely enclosed, isolated from the outside world – even the sounds of the city had receded to an almost indistinguishable murmur. Occasionally a child's high-pitched voice floated down through the dense matrix, but it was disembodied, androgynous, a reedy dreamtime fragment. Jesse was beginning to wonder if Sarah had lost her way when the corn ended

abruptly. They emerged into a grassy clearing. Jesse swivelled, a smile slowly lighting up his face. They were in the midst of a perfect circle.

‘Well?’ asked Sarah, her eyes zesting with delight.

Jesse gestured with his free hand. ‘Who planted all this?’

‘No clue. One of the gardeners, I reckon. But it’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Very.’

‘I’ve never seen wheat in these colours before. Must be a special hybrid.’

‘That’s because it’s not wheat. It’s amaranth.’

‘English, please.’

Jesse grinned. ‘*Huautli* to the Aztecs, who even used it in their religious ceremonies. It’s been around for thousands of years – first known record dates from about 4000 B.C. – and now grows just about everywhere. Cultivated a lot in India, where it’s both a leaf and grain crop. Very high in protein. And very productive. I’ve read that from one plant you can get 100,000 seeds.’

‘Is that so? Then it won’t matter that you’ve harvested several hundred of them.’

She pointed to his head and giggled once again. They had masses of seed, chaff, and torn leaf caught in their hair. A cloud of dust rose when Jesse threshed his own ragged crop with his fingertips, enough for both of them to sneeze.

Sarah picked a spot for them to eat more or less at random. There was no shade, though near the circumference of the circle the tall plants provided a little relief. Sarah knelt, began to unpack the carrier bag, then leaned back on her heels.

‘Your memory’s starting to worry me,’ she said. ‘Petabytes beyond industry standard.’

Jesse reddened. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to show off.’

‘There might be things to apologise for, but being intelligent isn’t one of them.’ She handed him a white carton. ‘That’s for Nubi.’

They ate. Jesse noticed that Sarah wolfed the food almost as hungrily as he did. No fine table manners here. They had plastic spoons to use, but Sarah broke off pieces of the chappatis to dip into her curry and didn’t hesitate to lick her fingers. Jesse was more fastidious.

‘When’s the last time you had a proper meal?’ Sarah asked.

Jesse shrugged.

After they’d sated their first hunger, Jesse fiddled with his spoon, turning it this way and that in his fingers. ‘Thanks for coming back,’ he said at last.

‘You scared me.’

‘Sorry,’ he muttered.

‘Not like that. I’m not afraid of you.’

‘You ought to be.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No.’

They were silent for a while.

Jesse lay back in the grass and stared up at the cloudless sky. Nubi was busy crunching away at his heap of bones. Nearby Sarah had twined her legs into a lotus, her eyes on the corn, her mind probably elsewhere; her breathing was faint but audible, reassuring. Otherwise, the world was still,

waiting for deliverance, or at least a winning lottery ticket. The canopy of heat draped a fine gauze across his eyes. He laid an arm behind his head. Summer memories of a swing, high scratchy grass, an ice cream dripping through his fingers, a child's giggle. There's no going back. A butterfly flutters and the world changes. Always, it changes. It does no good to wish, to regret, to what-if. You take what's handed out.

He must have slept. When he opened his eyes, the sun was lower in the sky. Nubi lay at his side, asleep, or half-asleep in the manner of dogs, for he cracked his eyes when Jesse stirred. Jesse realised what had awakened him.

Sarah was dancing.

Jesse tried not to make a sudden movement. Breathing as lightly as possible, he carefully shifted onto his side and propped himself on an elbow. With a feeling close to awe he quietened his mind, his noisy blood. He'd never seen anyone dance like this.

Sarah seemed to have grown taller. In an unbroken skein of movement she crosses and recrosses the nave of corn. Eyes shut, she sees with hands and feet and inner sight: a dreamweaver. Her body darts and flows to a music only she can hear, now bending, now reaching – gliding through the weft and warp of the universe, gathering the threads of time and space into a new pattern. Is she the dancer or the dance?

The earth slows, stops moving, turns black and cold. Against the deep velvet of space Sarah weaves a nebula of light. Jesse reaches out a hand, certain that he can pluck one of the stars – only one – from the glittering web. His fingers burn – the icy touch of a blade – and he jerks back with a cry.

Like a top Sarah spun to rest in the exact centre of the circle and opened her eyes, breathing gently.

'Jesse,' she said.

She smiled, came over to him, sat down, crossed her legs. Jesse thought he heard the cello again. He took a deep breath, as much to smell her warm spicy sweat as the lavender.

'If you want to join your friends, I don't mind,' he said. 'Maybe I was a *little* rude.'

'They'll survive.' Sarah stroked Nubi. 'Do you know how to use a skateboard?'

'No.'

'I'll teach you.'

She stood, brushed off her shorts. She extended her hand, and after a brief hesitation Jesse let her help him to his feet.

'My mother only asked for some information,' Sarah said. 'What happens to a minor who's homeless, who gets to take him in, stuff like that.'

Jesse snorted. 'Forget it.'

'Was it –?' She stopped, unable to complete her question.

He looked at her with a guarded expression in his eyes. 'It's over. The rest doesn't matter.'

'The summer won't last forever.'

'Nothing lasts forever,' he said with a twist of his lips.

Sarah tossed her plait over her shoulder, a gesture that he was coming to recognise as signalling impatience or even distaste.

'You can do better than that,' she said.

'Like what?'

'Like not hiding behind some stupid cliché. Like having a little self-respect. Like dealing with whatever's happened to you.'

'You know nothing about me.'

'No facts maybe. But I hardly need them to understand it's no life shivering under a bridge in a snowstorm. Scrounging for your next meal.' Sarah took a breath. 'Scared and cold and hungry. Lonely. Desperate.' She hesitated, then spoke bitterly. 'Or dead.'

Jesse held up a hand as if to ward off her words. One by one they stung his skin like angry wasps.

'Let's go,' he said, his voice rougher than he'd intended. Quickly he bent to collect their rubbish.

Chapter 5

Tondi's body glistened with sweat, her meagre clothes clinging to her skin. When she offered to lend Jesse her skateboard, he mumbled his thanks and kept his head low as she came close, too close. Let her think that he was embarrassed or overcome or whatever. With her board tucked under one arm he approached the ramp.

They wanted to humiliate him, Sarah's friends. They were practised skaters with lots of tricks and manoeuvres. At the skater plaza he'd watched them first on the concrete flat and ramps, then on the steps and rails and ledges, now on the half-pipe. All except Tondi, who skated well but kept in the background. The lads launched themselves from the top of the ramp straight into the air. They hung there, defying gravity, then twisted and flung themselves right back down. Impossible. Only they did it. No one in his right mind started there.

'Come on,' called the tallest bloke – Mick? – who had gelled blond hair, hot and taunting eyes. 'It's easy, give it a try.'

Jesse knew it wasn't easy. He wiped his hands on his jeans. He was beginning to be seriously annoyed with himself. At school he'd learned early on to keep a low profile, not to be drawn into lose-lose situations. What did he care what these stupid apes thought of him? He raised the board, about to toss it down in contempt. Sarah would be back any moment now. She'd never expect him to start with the half-pipe.

The sun had slid towards the trees, glazing the leaves with a shiny eggwash of light, as golden as his grandmother's Easter loaf studded with sultanas and almonds. He could taste Mick's mockery. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the packet of cigarettes that Sarah had bought him. He dropped the board on the patch of grass in front of him and put his left foot on the deck, testing its spring. It felt comfortable, right. Jesse lit a cigarette. His mind went back to Sarah's words: *stop running*.

Sarah rode into sight on Kevin's board, Nubi racing alongside her. Though she'd obviously given it some practice, she wasn't a skater like these four. Jesse could see that straightaway.

Plait frisking behind her, she swerved through the last curve and came laughing to a sudden halt in front of him. She flipped her board up, catching it in one hand. Nubi dropped down at Jesse's feet, panting.

'Don't you want to try?' she asked.

Tondi came sauntering over, Kevin right behind. He was carrying a bulging carrier bag, and his muscles bulged under his tan. Jesse was sure that the cut-off T-shirt he was wearing cost as much as it took to feed a third-world family for a month. Three months.

'Refreshments,' Kevin said with a smirk. No doubt he was underage. He called to Mick and Don. 'Hey, take a break. Lager's here.'

Kevin and Tondi sprawled on the grass. Sarah glanced at Jesse, and he caught the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Good. He'd agreed to go

skateboarding – not to be taken down. Defiantly, he turned on his heel to study the ramp. Mick and Don joined the others, both having worked up a sweat. Mick stripped off his too-tight tank-top, wiped his face ostentatiously, and stretched out with his arms behind his head, midriff ridged and bare and bragging.

Sarah flicked her plait over her shoulder. Brushing damp scallops of hair off her forehead, she took a step backwards. Mick could stand a shower, she thought, a little surprised at her own disgust. She used to admire the view as well as the next girl. Her eyes wandered towards Jesse, who was holding himself stiffly, his back proud and inaccessible under the old T-shirt. He was tall, but not too tall, lean to the point of hunger. He probably had more growing to do; he certainly needed feeding. Although his muscles were as well-defined as Mick's – his hair as blond, his shoulders fully as broad – there was something more understated, less showy about Jesse. Subtler, somehow. Even his skin, though tanned, didn't seem newly gilded like Don's after a week spent sailing the Mediterranean. Perhaps it was that Jesse wore his skin like a promise, and a refuge, reminding her of the exquisite polished surfaces of the Zen poetry they'd done in school last year, poems beautiful in their very impenetrability. His ragged hair hung well below the neckline. It was wild and soft and unruly, for he'd washed it only this morning. She thought that she might cut it for him, if he let her. She watched him a moment longer, then settled onto the ground, taking care to keep her distance from Mick, and accepted a lager. Jesse smoked his cigarette.

'Aren't you thirsty?' Mick asked him.

'I don't drink,' Jesse said without turning round.

'Well, pass us a cig then,' Kevin drawled.

Reluctantly Jesse handed him the packet.

Tondi shaded her eyes and looked up at Jesse. 'Which school do you go to?' she asked, taking another swig from her can.

'I don't go to school.'

Mick raised his eyebrows. 'Lucky sod,' he said. 'Where do you work?'

'I don't work,' Jesse said.

The four friends exchanged glances, while Sarah stared at her can.

'Well, well,' Kevin said. 'A real honest-to-goodness skiver.'

The others laughed. Sarah lifted her chin. Her colour had heightened, and she opened her mouth to speak. Narrowing his eyes, Jesse gave her an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He could take care of himself just fine.

'Do you do anything at all?' asked Mick.

'No.'

'Not even fuck?' Tondi asked, licking a bit of foam from her lips.

Jesse ground his cigarette out underfoot, bent and pocketed the butt, then picked up the skateboard. He strode towards the half-pipe and stepped onto the flat base. In the centre he stood there gazing up at the high sloping concrete walls. He squinted a little, shielding his eyes with a hand. The sun was just visible above the dense foliage of an oak tree. As he watched, the greens brightened to a dazzling emerald intensity. His heart was thudding, all his nerve endings buzzing. His mouth was dry. Raising the board above

his head, he felt a spark leap from the sun and race along the board, race through his hands, up his arms, into his shoulders, and he's gripping the deck tightly with his fingers. His body vibrates like a tuning fork to the high-pitched note the board emits. He closes his eyes, and the smell of pine resin fills his nostrils. He drops the board at his feet.

Back and forth Jesse pumps the ramps, back and forth and back again, building up speed through the U-shaped pipe till he nears the coping, where he ollies without rotating just as his front wheels kiss the lip. He rides back down, soon dropping into a crouch but straightening as he traverses the flat. Upon entering the sloped part of the ramp – the transition – he flexes his knees once more, then uncompresses them almost immediately. The momentum lofts him upwards on an immense wing of speed. Why has he never skated before? Nothing – not even swimming – has felt like this. The board, the pipe, the sky – all are his; his, the whole *universe*, and it sings to him. Again, effortlessly, he executes a perfect ollie. On the way down he takes a deep breath and tightens his diaphragm, sharpens his focus, then soars in a fluid line up the wall, lifting his arms, and rises high in an aerial off the vert, very high, then higher still, and catches – no, embraces – the unbounded air. He spins to meet the transition. The rush of exhilaration stays with him at re-entry into realtime.

A moment longer on the board, the smell of pine gradually fading. Then Jesse came off the pipe.

'You're right,' he said to Mick, tossing the board at his feet. 'It's easy.'

'It's an analemma,' Jesse said.

'A what?' Sarah asked.

'An analemma,' he repeated. 'The figure-8 path that the sun makes in the sky throughout the year. Have you got a globe at home?'

'There's one in Finn's office.'

'Have a look at it. Very often it's marked. Here Ursula has incised the figure-8 on the inner surface of the sundial.'

'How do you know these things?'

Jesse shrugged. 'I spend a lot of time in the library. Keeps the rain off.' He never talked about his memory – another of his rules.

The sundial was a dramatic and arresting piece of sculpture, an ellipse of carved white marble mounted on a stone pedestal. Beautifully proportioned, it stood about two metres high in the middle of a terraced plaza, where a group of jazz musicians was improvising to an appreciative gathering. The cellist had disappeared before Jesse and Sarah arrived.

'He's first-rate,' Jesse said, gesturing towards the trumpeter.

'Yeah, a lot better than my dad.'

'Your father plays?'

'A little piano, a little more trumpet. He's always threatening to take lessons again and get really good. If you ask me, he's tone deaf.'

'What else does he do, aside from motorbiking?'

'Plenty.'

Sarah glanced at Jesse, wondering whether to elaborate, whether to suggest that Jesse get to know Finn. But Jesse had moved closer to the sundial in order to read the inscription carved on the pedestal.

*Lay your shadows upon the sundials ...
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren ...
Rainer Maria Rilke*

Jesse read the lines aloud in German, then English. 'From *Autumn Day*,' he said. 'Fitting.'

'You read German?' Sarah asked, again impressed.

'Some.'

'Is that the same kind of *some* as in not knowing how to skate?'

'I was wondering when you'd ask me about that.'

He ran his hands through his hair, so that it became even more flyaway.

'Why did you tell me you'd never been on a skateboard before?' Sarah asked.

'Because it's true.'

'Then how on earth could you skate like that?'

'I don't know.'

Sarah snorted. 'Any other things you don't know how to do? Neurosurgery? Piloting the space shuttle? Diamond cutting? Or what about classical Greek? I bet you whip through Sophocles between beers. Oh that's right. You don't drink.'

'Don't exaggerate. I read a bit of German. It's no big deal. I happen to enjoy Rilke.' He looked at her shrewdly. 'You can't tell me that no one in your family opens a book. Your mother quoted Shakespeare to me this morning.'

'You're changing the subject.'

'Yeah, that's another thing I'm rather good at.'

Sarah couldn't help grinning. It was impossible to stay annoyed with him for long. 'Well, I hope you're good at maths too. I could certainly use some help once school begins.'

He frowned and looked away.

Shit, she thought. There I go again. Open mouth, insert foot. She hurried to make up for her misstep. 'Ursula doesn't just make sundials. She lectures part-time at university. Landscape design.'

'Is she from Germany?' Jesse asked.

'Berlin, originally. But her partner's local.' She regarded Jesse thoughtfully, as if to gauge his reaction.

'If you're trying to tell me she's lesbian, I'm not going to fall over in a dead faint.'

'Good. It's sometimes hard to predict how people take it.'

'There's nothing to take. It's a completely personal matter.'

Sarah thought how easy it was to talk to Jesse when he wasn't being secretive, or defensive. Like a brother, almost. Her throat tightened. Then she recalled his earlier comment. 'What did you mean by *fitting*?'

No answer. He had tilted his head, listening to the musicians and either didn't hear her question, or didn't want to hear. Sarah resolved to locate a copy of the poem at the next opportunity or ask Ursula upon her return.

Come to think of it, her father liked poetry. And spoke German. He might know. *Autumn Day*, she repeated to herself.

But Jesse was right. The trumpeter was impressive. Sarah began to pay attention. She'd had a good five years of piano lessons – not that anything much had taken – but as a dancer she'd learned quite a bit about music. She let herself be carried away by the intricacies of the riffs, by the voice of the trumpet rising above the other instruments like an unbroken spiral of sound, keen as a metal shaving, fluid as a river. Vaguely she was aware that Jesse had moved closer to the musicians, Nubi at his side, but otherwise she lost all sense of time and place as the music swept her along. She imagined a few steps, then a dance ... in blue ...

Sarah felt the touch on her hip at the same instant as she heard the grunt of pain from nearby. She whirled. A man was clutching his right hand in his left, his face contorted. His eyes were wide with shock, and his face greyish white under a rough stubble. Sarah could see the raw and blistered skin on his palm. It might have only been her imagination, but for a moment there seemed to be a faint wisp of smoke clinging to the blisters. The man muttered something unintelligible – it sounded like *caplata* – then turned, pushed his way through the crowd, and broke into a run.

'Are you OK?' Jesse was addressing her, but his eyes followed the man's flight.

'Yes,' she said, puzzled. 'Did you see what just happened?'

'Not exactly.'

'Me neither. I think that man' – she nodded in the direction the man had taken, though he was no longer to be seen – 'I think he wanted to grope me or steal my wallet or something. But he'd hurt his hand. It looked badly burnt. Anyway, he got scared and ran off.'

'As long as he didn't hurt you ...'

'No, nothing like that.' But she pulled her bag off her shoulder and looked inside. 'Everything's here. Maybe he just bumped against me with his injured hand. He must have been in agony.'

'Maybe.'

Jesse reached down to stroke Nubi's head, but not before Sarah caught a glimpse of a tiny spark of light deep within his eyes, blue within blue. Then he blinked, and his lashes swept away any trace of flame.

'He never dared to beat me properly,' Jesse said. 'A slap or two, a kick was as far as he went.'

'Your father?' Sarah asked.

'No. Mal, my last foster father. A vicious sod when he drinks.'

Sarah pressed her lips together.

'I left because I was afraid.'

'That he'd hurt you more?'

'That I might lose control and kill him if I stayed.'

For a long time neither of them spoke. They sat at the base of a horse chestnut, leaning against its thick solid trunk. Sarah combed the grass with her fingertips, grooming her flyaway thoughts. Nubi lay at their feet, his ear cocked as a bird scolded her mate in the canopy overhead. The soft light

which reached their skin felt as fresh as the fine spray off a waterfall. A few embryonic conkers lay scattered on the ground. Fallen too early, they would never ripen, never be collected for a playground game.

Sorry. The word tasted dry in her mouth, stale. She wished she knew what to say. Something like this was beyond her. Something you saw on TV, something you read about. Unreal. She looked at Jesse, who was staring off into the distance, and noticed a shadow just below the neckline of his T-shirt. She wondered if there were a bruise or birthmark on his back – not a question she could ask him easily. His hands were gripping his knees hard enough to whiten his knuckles. She would have liked to take his hand. There was a prominent callus on the middle finger of his left hand. Fingers that wrote a lot. Elegant, strong fingers. What do you say to someone who carries this around with him? She had no idea.

Sarah thought about her own father, his booming laugh and laughing eyes. He could roar in anger, and there had been more than enough dreadful fights in their family. But blows? Once when she'd opened his camera to look inside and spoiled a whole roll of film from Manchuria – she must have been four or five at the time – he'd smacked her bottom with a slipper and then hugged her afterwards, tears in his eyes. He'd never hit her again.

It had been years before she learned that other men hid their tears. She'd never forget the way he cried during that ghastly time ...

'Jesse,' she said, 'talk to my mother.'

He shook his head.

'She'll help you. I know she will.'

Jesse tore his gaze from whatever vista he'd been contemplating. He mustered a smile but Sarah saw the winter in his eyes, and more.

'I'll be all right,' he said.

Jesse laid his head upon his knees and his hair fell forward, screening his face. At Sarah's side lay a conker in its green case, one of several. She picked it up, turned it in her hand – perfectly formed if tiny. Leaning forward, she whispered Jesse's name and offered him the chestnut. Perplexed, he took the stunted little thing, and for a brief moment her fingers curled around his. Then he pulled away.

Chapter 6

'You're not eating,' said Sarah's mother.

The three of them were sitting in the kitchen at a battered wooden table, probably a family heirloom. A jug with sweet peas scented the room.

'Jesse?' Sarah's mother prompted.

'I'm not very hungry, Mrs –' He broke off, realising that he didn't know their surname.

'Andersen. But please call me Meg.'

He glanced at Sarah. 'We had a late meal.'

'That reminds me,' Meg said. 'Thomas rang. You forgot your mobile again.'

'Oh shit. I was supposed to meet him in the afternoon,' Sarah said. 'He was going make his famous coconut ice cream cake.'

'He was very nice about it, considering he'd gone to all that trouble,' Meg said.

Sarah flushed. 'I got the message.'

Hurriedly she finished the food on her plate and reached for seconds. For such a slender girl, she ate a lot. Nor did she pretend about it. She chewed with gusto – like most things she did, Jesse suspected. Was Thomas the boyfriend?

'At least try some,' Sarah said, her mouth around a large forkful of salad.

Jesse took a bite of his quiche. The pastry was rich and flaky – obviously homemade. Sarah's mum was a good cook. He wished he had more appetite, but his headache, which had toyed with him off and on all day, was now scratching impatiently at the door. It was one of the reasons he had, in the end, gone back home with Sarah. He simply couldn't face another night on the street.

'Aren't you on duty tonight?' Sarah asked her mother.

'Not till tomorrow.'

Sarah saw the question in Jesse's eyes. She was about to explain when her mum's slight frown checked her. The *not yet* was as clear as if Meg had spoken the words aloud.

'I'll ring Thomas, then how about some TV?' Sarah asked.

'Or sleep.' Meg's eyes rested on Jesse, who found it very difficult to interpret her thoughts – not that she hid them from view, for her gaze was direct and candid. No, it was far more like watching a school of fish whose iridescent scales flashed just below the surface, yet which slipped away as soon as you tried to lower the net.

Meg pushed back her chair and crossed to the electric kettle, filled it at the tap, and switched it on. 'I'll make you some tea,' she said to him.

'Yuk,' said Sarah. 'not that dreadful stuff.'

But Jesse would be glad to drink it, anything at this point to avoid a migraine; nightmares. Then a bath and bed: he shivered with pleasure at the

thought of an entire night in comfort and safety. To sleep as long as he liked ...

As Meg handed him the mug of herbal tea, she let her hand rest on his shoulder for a moment. Unprepared, he camouflaged his reaction with a neck roll, almost smoothly enough to fool her that his muscles were stiff. A small crease puckered her brow.

Sarah's voice cut across the open waters between them like the fierce carved prow of a longboat. 'Are you're OK? You're very pale.'

Tomorrow. He would leave first thing tomorrow. He could feel the weight of Meg's solicitude bearing down on him like a second ship.

Why were they bothering with him, a complete stranger? Nobody just took some kid in off the street. He liked them, but well-meaning people were often the most dangerous sort. With the nasty ones you knew where you stood, had no compunction about dealing with them. But those fools who imagined they knew what was best for everybody else, who were only doing it *for your own good* – if he heard that phrase one more time – they were the ones to watch out for. You wanted a little relief, you wanted to trust them, and then wham! rammed by a bloody frigate. And the self-righteous never forgave.

'What's the matter?' Sarah persisted.

'Drink your tea, Jesse,' Meg said. 'I've added some honey for energy. Then get a good night's sleep. There'll be time enough to talk tomorrow.'

At least she hadn't said that things would look different in the morning, Jesse thought. And then he understood that Meg had reproved Sarah, however mildly.

Sarah rose, collected the plates, and scraped the remains of Jesse's quiche into Nubi's dish. The dog didn't need any prompting when it came to food, and he'd licked the basin clean and bumped it noisily across the floor with his muzzle, trying to get the very last smear, before they had a chance to wonder whether he'd eat French cuisine. They all laughed, even Jesse, and the slight tension in the room dissipated.

Sarah brought out a chocolate mousse and arched an eyebrow. Jesse shook his head, then ducked it with a rueful grin. Headache or no headache he could never resist chocolate.

'Do you have something to sleep in?' Meg asked him when he'd finished. 'If we get rain, the temperature will probably drop.'

'I raided those trunks in the attic,' Sarah said. 'I thought it would be OK under the circumstances. But I forgot pyjamas.'

Sarah was studying her spoon from all angles, as if a secret password were etched somewhere on its surface. She avoided looking at her mother. There was a short silence.

'It doesn't matter,' Jesse said. 'I can manage without.'

'No, it's fine,' Meg said. 'Would you mind fetching a pair, Sarah? There should be some in the smaller trunk, underneath the underwear and T-shirts. I'll bring Jesse an extra blanket in the meantime.'

Sarah nodded, and Jesse could see the relief on her face.

A door slammed from the front of the house. Nubi rose from his place at Jesse's feet and stretched. He padded towards the kitchen door, cocking his head curiously.

'I'm back,' a man's voice bellowed.

'Dad!' Sarah whooped, evidently forgetting to use his first name in her enthusiasm.

Even Meg, normally soft spoken, couldn't repress her delight. 'Finn!' she exclaimed.

The next few minutes passed in a jumble of hugs and kisses and parcels and cases and exclamations and cameras and questions and snatches of sentences. Jesse had risen with the others and stood a little apart, watching the effervescence with unexpected pleasure. He couldn't help being caught up in their excitement. When things had quieted down, Sarah's father turned to Jesse.

'And this is –' he began.

'Jesse.' Meg said, her smile drawing him into their circle. 'A new friend. He'll be staying the night.'

Sarah's dad nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world and extended his hand. Jesse wasn't used to such courtesy and took a second to hold out his own. Finn noticed his hesitation.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to put you on the spot. I travel so much that I've grown accustomed to greeting people this way.' His handshake was firm and welcoming. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'My pleasure, sir,' Jesse said, touched by the man's attempt to put him at ease. A handshake was surely normal in the kind of society the Andersens frequented.

Sarah gawped. '*Sir?*'

Her father laughed. 'Now where did you find him, Sarah? I haven't been called *sir* by anyone not hoping for a tip since my military days.'

'I didn't know you'd served in the army,' Sarah said.

'I didn't,' Finn said.

They all laughed. Finn's face was deeply tanned, his tonsure shaggy, his beard a rich redgold. When he laughed, everything about him laughed – his bright blue eyes, his gap teeth, his belly. He was a large – a very large – man who didn't seem to mind the roll of fat that drooped over his jeans. Jesse wondered whose clothes they'd lent him. Obviously not Finn's.

'You're thinner,' Sarah said, jabbing her finger at her father's stomach.

'Yeah, short rations and lots of hiking will do that to you.' He glanced at the kitchen table. 'Quiche. *Quiche*. And chocolate mousse. Thank god I'm home before I starved to death.'

He went to the sink to wash his hands, then cut himself a thick wedge and took a bite. He closed his eyes dramatically, smacked his lips, sighed.

'If they had tasted that at Sparta, they wouldn't have bothered with Helen.' He grinned wickedly at his wife. 'Well, not till they'd eaten their fill.'

Meg blushed.

Jesse exchanged glances with Sarah. She wasn't even remotely bothered. Was this the way it could be? People spending years – a lifetime – together?

'Finn, cut it out. You're too old for jokes like that,' Sarah said. 'You're embarrassing Jesse.'

'Oh ho, my girl, you're never too old for foreplay,' Finn said.

Now it was Sarah's turn to blush. To cover up her discomfiture, she began loading the dishwasher, but not before shooting a look at Jesse which clearly said: *parents!*

'It's fine,' Jesse said, a bit shyly.

Finn licked his fingers. 'Good,' he said to Jesse. 'I'm glad to find there's someone your age who doesn't think an untimely frost lies upon everyone over thirty.'

'Shakespeare's Capulet,' Jesse said with a grin.

'An educated man!'

Finn spoke with a trace of accent which Jesse tried and failed to place – not precisely American, certainly not Australian, but what?

'So, Jesse,' Finn said, going to the fridge and peering in, 'is this your dog or have my wife and daughter been busy with a new project?'

Jesse sat down at his place. He shrugged in resignation. 'Mine. Sort of.'

'Sort of?'

Meg rummaged in a cupboard and brought out a bottle of wine. She added wineglasses to the clutter on the table, a corkscrew. Finn picked up the bottle and scrutinised the label, then tugged his beard.

'A good red,' he said. 'Another gift from a patient?'

'Patient?' Jesse asked.

'Hasn't Sarah told you?' Finn asked. 'Meg's nearly finished her training at the local loony bin.'

'Finn!'

'All right, all right. Specialist registrar at our psychiatric hospital.'

'A psychiatrist?' asked Jesse, appalled.

'Yes, for kids and teens,' Finn said. 'Bloody tough work, too. With Sarah growing up and my being away so much, Meg decided she'd stayed home long enough. It hasn't always been easy, but it's what she loves.'

Finn decanted the wine and poured them all a glass. 'A toast,' he said, holding his up to the light. 'To home and family and friends.'

'I don't drink,' Jesse said.

Chapter 7

'May I come in?'

Jesse nodded. The knock hadn't come as a complete surprise, though he'd hoped to leave unobtrusively. He'd already changed back into his own things and packed his rucksack. Sarah's mother must have ironed his freshly washed clothes, for he'd found them neatly folded on the bed; she'd even mended a hole in the pocket of his jeans. His thank-you note lay on the desk.

Meg closed the door behind her, something which Jesse couldn't make out cupped in her right hand. In the dim light her face hovered like a bright flame above a long taper. Her white jeans and shirt shone. Jesse glanced at the window. He'd been so engrossed in his churning thoughts that he'd not noticed the change.

'A storm's coming,' Meg said.

The wind was rising, drawing a heavy curtain of cloud across the sky and masking the last twilight. The air crackled with energy. Meg moved towards him and extended her right arm, pearly as the inner skin of an onion. As Jesse reached for the object in her hand, their fingertips brushed. Cool bluewhite tongues flowed across his fingers and up his arm. With an oath he took a step backwards. He waved his arm, and drops of fire splashed onto the floor. His heart began to pound. Wildly, he tried to shake off the flames. They splattered around him. He whirled in panic, thinking to douse them, smother them ... anything.

In the corner an emaciated, naked lad is lying on a mattress with his arm across his face. His long reddish hair is matted and filthy, his body not much cleaner, and he's shivering violently.

'Jesse,' Meg said, 'please stay. It's not a good time to leave.'

At the sound of her voice the figure disappeared, as well as the flames. Jesse spun back round to Meg, who was bending to retrieve whatever she'd brought with her.

'Who are you?' Jesse cried.

Meg went to the doorway and switched on the overhead light.

'It'll rain soon,' she said. 'A thunderstorm, I think. Where will you go? We're far from the city centre. Wait at least until morning.'

Slowly Jesse swivelled and examined every corner of the room. All was empty and bright – no deep shadows.

'Did you see him?' he asked, his voice urgent.

'Nobody sees what anyone else sees.'

'Don't give me that meaningless drivell!'

'I can't help you if you won't allow me to.'

'I haven't asked for your help, and I don't want it.'

But even to his own ears his protest sounded petulant, childish. He averted his eyes, shocked by the sudden welling of tears. Because of course

she was right. Where would he go in the middle of the night? in the middle of a thunderstorm? He swallowed, gagging at the coppery taste.

'There's absolutely no shame in accepting help,' Meg said.

Gingerly he seated himself on the bed and clasped his hands between his knees, bowing his head. He tried to think.

Meg waited a few minutes, then came and stood nearby without crowding him. No matter how grim, he'd always been able to see the irony in a situation. So Meg knew how to handle a troubled adolescent, did she? Of all the places for him to end up ... But then she smiled, her eyes compassionate, and he felt the warmth of her empathy. It wasn't just a job for her. Maybe.

'Here, I've brought you this.'

Nestled snugly in her palm was a blue wooden top, a child's toy the size of a large chestnut. Jesse accepted it with misgiving. He'd almost expected some kind of handout – clothes, enough money for a meal or two, a referral card, all nothing he'd accept. But a top? What the hell was he supposed to do with a top? And this from a shrink? Vampires, all of them, feeding off other people's tainted blood. Playing their little games.

'Do you mind if I sit down?' Meg asked, indicating the desk chair. 'My eyeteeth are of normal length.'

Jesse caught his breath. He raised his eyes to Meg's, which contained nothing more than an amber gleam of laughter. And yet ...

He gestured for her to sit, but his gaze returned to the corner of the room. It occurred to him that if Meg hadn't been here, the lad might have spoken. Then vexed, he shook his head to dispel his own illusions. The figure had seemed so real. Could Meg have had something to do with it? He still hadn't recovered that chunk of memory after he'd first drunk her brew.

Jesse ran his fingers along the smooth surface of the top. Ash, he thought. The wood was warm, its varnish worn thin in places. The more he rubbed, the more he enjoyed its texture.

'Don't give me gifts,' he said, curt and almost surly. But he didn't hand it back.

'You may need it,' Meg said. 'It has a habit of returning to where it's needed.'

She sat down facing Jesse. He soon realised that she had no intention of saying another word till he spoke. Fine with him. Two could play that game. He was good at it.

The curtains at the open window shivered. The air felt swollen, bloated. Jesse held himself stiffly on the bed; he could smell his own sweat. He closed his eyes to find Emmy smiling at him above her glass of milk, the usual moustache painting her upper lip. She licks at it with her kitten tongue. No! Not that road, not here, not now – not ever. Memory's nothing more than a combination of electrical and chemical codes, with enough effort he'll delete them. Eventually.

'Is Emmy a friend?' Meg asked.

He must have said the name aloud.

'No,' he whispered, his voice unsteady.

'Would you like to tell me about her?'

He shook his head. 'You're a psychiatrist.'

'A punishable offence?' She smiled.

'I'm not mad,' he said defiantly. 'There was a strange boy in the corner.'

'You don't have to prove it to me.'

'Then you *did* see him.'

'There are different kinds of seeing.'

Jesse searched her face, but she seemed perfectly serious.

'Who are you?' he asked. '*What* are you?'

'I think you already know that words, powerful as they are, *wonderful* as they are, can describe only a very thin slice of our reality – some believe, make our reality. Whatever I said would conceal – distort – more than it would convey to you.'

He jackknifed forward, his body sharp with anger, his words steel-tipped. 'Typical shrink. Always twisting things. Always wriggling out from under.'

'Not the first one you've met, I gather.' Her voice, though amused, carried an undertone of regret – apology, almost.

'I don't need this.'

'You're quite well read – exceptionally so for your age, perhaps any age. Surely you know about the Freudian mechanisms of negation and disavowal.'

Suddenly tired, Jesse dropped his head into his hands. A few fat raindrops splattered against the sill, and through the open window he heard them beginning to spit on the patio roof, still warm from the day's heat. He dragged his gaze towards the window. While he and Meg had been talking the sky had closed completely. Treetops were bowing – almost cowering – before black thunderclouds massed above the city. The curtains blew inwards like a girl's long hair. Very soon the storm would break in earnest.

'Gifts are hard,' Meg said. 'Yet for all that –' she broke off and gazed into the corner where the lad had been.

Jesse stared at her. A chill draught blew across the back of his neck.

'What do you see?' he asked.

Jesse couldn't tell if Meg heard him. A flash of lightning lit the sky, momentarily blinding, followed almost immediately by a loud clap of thunder. From the landing came the sound of Nubi whining, then his paws scrabbling at the closed door, more whimpering. Jesse glanced again at Meg, who hadn't moved, then went to let him in. Their old border collie Bridget had always crawled under Jesse's bed during a storm.

And then in one great fall as if the belly of the sky had been slashed open with a sword, it rained. An awesome display of power. The storm strode across the city, its booted feet and balled fists heading straight for this house and this moment and this encounter. Jesse had never been afraid of lightning – its fire was pure, and utterly exhilarating.

Jesse crossed to the window and leaned out over the sill. Rain lashed his face, and the front of his T-shirt was soaked through within seconds. Release had dispelled the heaviness in the air. A heady feeling of elation seized hold of him, and fatigue forgotten, he closed his eyes, stretched out his arms, and breathed ... breathed. The next fork of lightning split the sky with a jagged shriek. It leaped straight for him. The house shook with the force of its impact. Meg rose with a hoarse cry from her seat, staring in horror as a

sheet of incandescent light enveloped Jesse. Dazzled, she was forced to blink.

‘Magnificent, isn’t it?’

Smiling, Jesse gestured towards the sky. He’d turned back from the window. Meg could discern a faint play of luminescence along his skin, like the glittering tracery of a great metropolis seen from the air at night, then a lingering glow, then the sheen of rain. The top lay on his palm, unharmed.

Nubi whined from under the bed. Jesse knelt to coax the dog from his hiding place, stroked him, laid his head on the animal’s quivering flank. Emmy had sometimes fallen asleep next to Bridget. Jesse felt a warning prickle behind his lids.

‘Jesse.’

Meg stood above him. Her beautiful eyes saw too much. He buried his face in Nubi’s fur, ashamed of his weakness. She crouched down next to him, rested a gentle hand over his.

‘Please stay,’ she said.

As Meg headed towards the kitchen to fix a platter of cheese and crackers for everyone, she automatically glanced at her wrist when she heard their grandfather clock strike the half-hour. Puzzled, she came to an abrupt halt. Her watch was solid, self-winding, and Swiss – a gift from Finn to celebrate her MRCPsych. A beautiful timepiece, it was never inaccurate. Sarah joked that they could use it to time the next Big Bang. Then why had it stopped ten or twelve minutes ago? She looked closer, and her fingertips began to tingle. She was wrong, it hadn’t stopped. The second hand was oscillating erratically, like the needle of a compass in the presence of a moving magnet.

Jesse stood on the roofed patio, smoking and watching the rain, which had settled into a steady downpour. It had just gone ten, but Sarah was still talking with her father while Meg frowned over a sheaf of notes, half listening to the conversation. Jesse had tried to read in his room but had been too restless to concentrate. For a while he’d played with the top, not that he believed it would help him to focus his thoughts despite Meg’s claim. He had no use for hypnosis, or self-hypnosis. Finally he’d given up and come down to join the others. He’d eaten some cheese, feeling awkward and uncomfortable, wondering the whole time whether he’d taken the right decision. He considered telling Sarah how annoyed he was at her for concealing her mother’s occupation. But what was the point? In a few hours he’d be gone.

‘All right?’

Jesse turned at the sound of Finn’s deep voice.

‘Fine,’ Jesse said. He didn’t know why he should feel guilty being caught with a cigarette.

Finn pulled out a pipe and filled it from a leather pouch. He tamped down the tobacco with his forefinger. With a large old-fashioned lighter – a really handsome piece, silver, engraved, probably a genuine Zippo – Finn lit the tobacco and puffed with noisy enjoyment.

‘Meg doesn’t care for cigarettes in the house. A pipe she doesn’t mind,’ Finn said, ‘but I got used to an evening smoke outdoors on one of my first expeditions. Even in winter I come outside, look up at the sky.’

‘You’ve been to many places, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, too many, I sometimes think. It must be the Viking blood.’

‘I wondered about your accent.’

‘I grew up in Norway, though I’ve lived in several countries.’

‘What do you mean by *too many*?’ Jesse asked, curious. He would love to travel, see the places he’d only read about. What he did was not travelling.

‘It becomes harder to look at things with an open mind, to appreciate them. You get inured to strangeness.’ He looked at Jesse. ‘To suffering and poverty too.’

They were quiet for a time.

Jesse stubbed out his cigarette, then bent and picked up the butt. ‘I’ll be leaving in the morning,’ he said. ‘Thank you for your hospitality. I appreciate it.’

‘Would you like to see my darkroom?’

Jesse nodded, relieved that Finn didn’t press him to stay.

‘Come on, then,’ Finn said, stooping to knock the ash from his pipe into a terracotta pot. ‘Before Meg thinks of something for me to do.’

Chapter 8

The darkroom occupied most of the cellar – though in this case the word *darkroom* was doubly a misnomer, for it comprised some six interconnecting rooms, brightly lit and each with its own function. In the printing room Finn demonstrated the red safety lights, then explained the more arcane pieces of equipment. The office seemed as much sitting room as workplace, with its comfortable leather sofa and armchair, bookshelves, refrigerator, and ultra high-tech espresso machine which could probably produce rocket fuel in a pinch. Cameras, lenses, and filters lay everywhere; several tripods were stacked in a corner.

‘Don’t you do most everything on computers nowadays?’ Jesse asked.

Finn smiled. ‘A certain amount, of course. But I prefer the old-fashioned methods. More subtlety, more depth of expression.’

‘May I have a look at some of your work?’

‘No need to be polite. Sarah hates it if I try to convert her friends.’

‘I really like what I’ve seen upstairs.’

‘OK. How about a coffee first?’

Jesse nodded, and Finn gestured towards the sofa.

‘Espresso or cappuccino?’ Finn asked.

‘Uh ... cappuccino, I suppose.’

Jesse watched as Finn played with his machine. The heady smell of coffee soon filled the room. Jesse accepted the overlarge cup that Finn passed him, added several spoonfuls of sugar, and took a cautious sip. One cup should be OK. He was getting to like their bitter brew. It was a little like the Andersens themselves – potent, best in small doses.

Finn rummaged in one of his storage cupboards. ‘Here,’ he said, tearing open a packet of shortbread. ‘Secret supply.’ He patted his stomach.

They drank their coffee and crunched their way through the biscuits in companionable silence. When they had finished, Finn handed Jesse a large book, the kind that people bought as Christmas or birthday presents.

‘One of my last projects. I know it’s a coffee-table thing, but I did enjoy doing the photographs.’

Jesse slowly turned the pages while Finn fiddled with the computer on his desk.

‘Do you mind if I check my email?’ Finn asked. ‘I need to do a bit of catching up.’

‘Fine with me.’

Finn returned to his monitor, while Jesse continued to study the book on his lap. It was demanding, provocative – unexpected. He wondered whose coffee tables it would grace. The photographs were brutal: mutilated bodies, acts of violence, slaughterhouse scenes juxtaposed with sensuous objects – a flower, a stone, a breast. There were abstract elements in most of the photographs, and many of the colours had been manipulated. Some pictures

were monochromatic, some in black-and-white, others in full colour. Jesse turned back to check the title of the book: *Transitions*. There was no text.

One photograph made his heart race: a little girl lying naked on a fold of black velvet. More than half her face was burnt away to the bone, and there were huge blackened craters along most of her body. A glistening seashell had been placed between her thighs, obscuring whatever remained of her genitals. In colour it might have been horrendous, but in black-and-white it shimmered with an otherworldly light.

Jesse closed the book. He looked around the room. The air was cool, the light artificial. It was impossible to tell whether it was still raining, whether in fact it was night or day down here. A faint hum from the fridge and computer were the only sounds he could detect, aside from Finn's breathing. Even the shadows in the corners of the room didn't stir.

To take something like that and make it beautiful – his gut twisted at the thought. What kind of man was Finn? A husband, a father, a *nice guy*. He would never throw stones at a dog, never beat his daughter, never murder anyone. Jesse closed his eyes, but the image waited behind his lids. He could feel the skin on his face grow clammy.

Jesse shoved the book onto the sofa and stood up.

'I feel sick,' he said. 'Is there a toilet down here?'

Finn looked up, his face concerned. 'A glass of water?'

Jesse shook his head. 'Just the toilet,' he gasped.

Finn rose and put his arm around Jesse's shoulders, which Jesse shook off. Not that, not him. Finn led Jesse to the little alcove under the stairs and snapped on the light.

'Do you want me to –'

Jesse brushed past without answering and shut the door. He leaned his head against the cool surface of the mirror above the basin, finding that his nausea subsided as soon as he was alone. A little girl no more than five or six years old. Blond hair still intact on one side of her scalp. Pearly fingernails on her left hand, dimpled. The other a blackened stump. Jesse! Where are you? Cries struck from the cold metal of memory. He grasped the sides of the basin. What's done is done. There are no second chances.

He stared at himself in the mirror. Not a mark on his face, not a single scar anyone would be able to detect. Not that it mattered – all the real ugliness was inside. A fucking monster. How would he get through the next fifty or sixty years?

Finn rapped softly on the door. 'Jesse,' his voice muffled, 'are you all right?'

Jesse gave himself one last mocking look in the mirror. Yeah, I'm all right. He splashed some water on his face and drank a few mouthfuls. Finn would have heard any vomiting, but Jesse wasn't about to stick his fingers down his throat. He unbolted the door.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'It was nothing. Just tired.'

Finn massaged the skin beneath his beard, which in other men might be a delaying tactic, or uncertainty, or even a good way to disguise a stutter like that *I'm Philip C-c-canker your new social worker but just call me Phil* fool.

'Come back and sit down,' Finn said.

'I'd like to go to bed.' Jesse found it hard to avoid the implacable shutter of Finn's eyes. 'It's been a long day, and I'd rather get an early start in the morning.'

'Soon. I want to talk to you.'

Jesse considered refusing. It would be easy enough; he was leaving tomorrow anyway, so what difference did it make? People expected teenagers to be rude and thoughtless, self-centred. And they were shit-scared of the wild ones, the runaways, the kids begging for spare change; scared – and ashamed, too.

Finn waited, his eyes calm and steady and unreadable. There was nothing scared about him.

Jesse shrugged. He might as well hear what Finn had to say.

'Which photo was it?' Finn asked after installing himself in the armchair.

'I don't know what you mean.'

'I think you do.' Finn spoke quietly enough, but Jesse began to suspect that the kindly teddy bear had claws. He should have known that anyone who could create such photographs was no fool, and no wimp either. Yet there wasn't anything menacing in Finn's voice.

Finn reached over and handed him the book. 'Why don't you show me?'

The photograph had been about two-thirds of the way through the volume. Jesse started on the very first page, turning over each leaf slowly and deliberately as if he had trouble recognising what he was looking for. It did no good. Finn watched him without an iota of impatience, the way he probably watched all the victims of his lens.

When Jesse finally reached the photograph, he was prepared for it, and still he flinched. Finn took the book out of his hands and studied the image. He was quiet for a long while. Then he sighed.

'I could tell you that the girl's body was only a computer-generated image, but you wouldn't believe me, would you?'

Jesse compressed his lips.

'I sometimes do a spot of work for the coroner's office and the police. Mostly violent crimes against children. It's my way of trying to help out, to make people aware of what's happening, hopefully to change things a bit.'

'You call this *helping*?' Jesse cried.

'If it moves people –'

Jesse interrupted him. 'You have no right! It's a violation, the worst kind. And then to make it so beautiful –' Jesse stopped, unable to continue. His voice had begun to shake. To his horror he felt the bitterness well, then spill. How could he cry, when all he wanted to do was sneer at this stupid, insensitive man? Finn would think him pathetic. Not that he cared what Finn thought. Jesse bit his cheek, but the more he tried to hold back, the harder it became. He dropped his face into his hands. His lungs and throat and bony shoulders were soon aching from the outpouring of grief, from the savage gale which tore through his frame. He hadn't wept like this in years.

Swiftly Finn moved to Jesse's side, the sofa sagging like an old friend under his weight. Once again he laid his arm across Jesse's shoulders. This time Jesse didn't push him away. Finn's arm was strangely light, a featherweight of flesh and bone and salty sweat. Jesse couldn't have borne a yoke.

Finn said nothing, just let him cry. Finn's own throat was tight, clogging with compassion for this proud and wounded and magnificent creature – half man, half child. We take the most perfect spirit, he thought bitterly, and flay it, gouge it, twist it until it yields or breaks. What kind of beings are we? what monsters? what hitlers? Very gently he caressed Jesse's shoulder, his thumb making small circles on the worn T-shirt. It did little to stop the shudders, shudders so strong that they penetrated to his own core.

Gradually the spasms subsided. Jesse raised his head and stammered an apology. Finn removed his arm but remained close. His bulk drew Jesse against him the way a solid mass attracts a passing asteroid in the cold empty corridors of space. Jesse wiped his face with his hand, sniffed. Finn fished in his pocket and brought out an old-fashioned handkerchief.

'Here,' he said. 'It's clean. Have a good blow.'

After making thorough use of the handkerchief, Jesse crumpled it in his hand, then released his fingers so that the square of cloth unfurled like a crocus in sunlight.

'I don't usually do this,' he said.

'No, I imagine you don't. More's the pity. There's such a thing as taking reserve too far.'

'You mean I should always sob on the shoulders of strangers?' asked Jesse with a hint of a smile.

Finn had a hearty chuckle. 'Let's just say that I prefer a man who's not afraid to show his feelings.' Then his expression became sober. 'Ever hear of Janis Joplin?'

'A blues singer, wasn't she? Back in the sixties?'

'Yeah, rock with a heavy blues spin. My mother's a great fan of the blues. Joplin died when I was a kid but one of her most famous songs has always stayed with me. *Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose* ...'

Jesse thought about it for a few seconds, then nodded. 'Yeah, I see.'

'Good, because I would hate for you to go on believing that you don't need anybody.'

Jesse gazed down at the handkerchief still in his hands. 'I'm OK,' he muttered.

'She overdosed, you know,' Finn said. 'She was twenty-seven years old.'

Jesse rose, walked to the nearest bookshelf, and ran his fingers along the spines of a row of books, their comforting voices now muted by a soft prattle from beyond the thick stone walls of the house.

'It's still raining?' he asked.

'A real keeper. Probably rain right through till morning.'

Jesse turned and looked at Finn, who hadn't moved from the sofa. 'I don't do drugs.'

'That's not what I meant. There are lots of different ways to overdose.'

A long silence, interrupted by a ping from the computer.

'Incoming mail,' Finn said.

'You want to get some work done.'

Again Jesse trailed his fingers along the books, lingering over one or two large glossy volumes as though reluctant to leave. Finn yawned, then levered himself to his feet, stretched, and yawned again. He was getting too old for airplanes and time zones and jetlag.

‘Another cup of coffee?’ Finn asked.

Jesse shook his head. The coffee machine gurgled and hissed while Finn waited, his occasional sideways glance as unobtrusive as his profession required, but the boy seemed hypnotised by the row of books. There were still traces of tears on his cheeks.

Once the espresso was ready, Finn crossed the room to his desk, pulled out his chair, and settled down. Through the rising steam from his cup he finally ventured to study Jesse more closely; to admit to himself the direction of his thoughts.

Finn wasn’t a particularly religious man – he just managed Christmas – but his heart was beating with something bordering on hope. Is this what he is? Finn asked himself. A second chance? A way to redeem ourselves – *myself*? Coming out of nowhere. Homeless, needy. Hardly older than a boy. Nothing left to lose. We’ve tried so hard to make sense of things. To get on with living, the way everyone always says. Does the universe ever throw us a gift? Or does it just seem that way? And what does it matter so long as we get it right this time?

Finn was careful to keep his voice even when he spoke. ‘I think you owe us something for the meals and bed.’

Jesse jerked his hand away from the books as though an electric current had run through his fingers. ‘I beg your pardon?’ he stammered.

‘Don’t look so alarmed. I only want a promise from you.’

‘What sort of promise?’

Finn regarded him shrewdly. ‘Your word that you won’t steal away in the early hours before having breakfast with me.’

Jesse exhaled in relief. He hadn’t been aware of holding his breath.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘That I can do.’ He grinned crookedly. ‘How did you know? And how do you know you can trust me?’

Finn ignored the first question. ‘If I didn’t trust you, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You only say what you mean, don’t you?’

Jesse ducked his head, inordinately pleased as if he’d just been given a gift, one he’d longed and longed for without the least hope of fulfilment – a little boy who knew there was no way his parents could afford that train set for Christmas.

‘Sarah will probably sleep in, but Meg has to be at the hospital by eight. I usually make breakfast and eat with her when I’m home. Is quarter to seven too early for you?’

‘No.’

‘You needn’t –’ Finn broke off. ‘Never mind, go to bed. I want to finish up some paperwork. We’ll talk tomorrow.’

Jesse nodded. He handed Finn his handkerchief, which the older man carelessly stuffed back into his pocket, and made for the stairs. At the doorway he paused, absentmindedly fingered the supple black leather of a motorcycle outfit hanging near the door, then turned round.

‘Mr Andersen –’ Jesse began.

‘Finn.’

‘Finn. The photographs are very beautiful. It’s just that –’ He stopped, wondering how to go on without reopening the wound. ‘The girl. The burn victim. I was wrong. The obscenity is in me, not in the photo.’

Finn was holding a pencil in his hand, an elegant mechanical one. He clicked the feed a few times, pressed the fragile lead back into the body of the pencil, clicked again.

'I never photograph the dead without a sense of debt, and deep respect. They teach us in a way that the living never can. The police told me something about her history. Her parents –'

'No!'

The pencil lead snapped.

'I can't,' Jesse said. 'Not yet.'

Finn laid the pencil down. Leaning his elbows on his desk, he steepled his hands and tapped them repeatedly against pursed lips, a gesture that already seemed familiar to Jesse.

'Jesse, if you don't revisit the past, you forfeit the future.'

Jesse looked at Finn with deeply dungeoned eyes. 'I have no past.'

'Everyone has a past,' Finn replied.

Chapter 9

Jesse woke to a pale skin forming across the sky. He liked to sleep with open window and open curtains and open nightscape, not that he believed his dream soul wandered to other realms – he'd leave that to the sociologists and shamanic freaks. And no sane person wanted to go where his dreams often took him. But tonight the storm seemed to have washed his mind clean; he couldn't recall a single dream.

He glanced towards the window. The rain had stopped, and the air smelled warm and sweet, like the day's first milking. He'd leave right after breakfast. Hot water, a soft clean bed, and food – always food – how easy it was to become seduced by comfort.

That photograph. Jesse's thoughts skidded towards it, though he wrenched the steering wheel and tried to apply the brakes – a mistake, as any driver could have told him. He recalled reading that certain cultures wouldn't submit to photographs: the camera stole their souls. There *was* a kind of magic in it, he had to admit – the blank sheet of paper floating in a chemical bath, then the image gradually materialising, summoned forth from some incorporeal dimension. But the little girl had not been coaxed to surrender her soul; it had been wrest from her by fire before Finn had ever set eyes on her pitiful corpse.

Now wide awake, Jesse sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, ran his hands through his hair. He wanted to see the photograph again. It was not a good idea – he knew that. But maybe if he steered into the skid ...

Nubi made a half-hearted attempt to accompany Jesse, but curled up on the mat at the whispered command to stay. Someone must have trained him, and Jesse wondered what stories the dog might recount. At least the Andersens would treat him kindly or, Jesse trusted, find him a good home. Nubi's eyes invited soppy metaphor as the two of them, dog and boy, regarded each other for a moment before Jesse slipped barefoot from the room, admonishing himself sternly that he couldn't possibly manage with a pet.

The house was still. Jesse had no trouble making his way to the cellar stairs, where he paused before descending. Not even a snore. The house could easily have been empty. Jesse shut the cellar door behind him carefully, and with the handrail as guide, groped his way in the dark. Once satisfied that nobody was in the darkrooms, he'd switch on the light. It would have been simple enough to knock or call out. He couldn't have explained why he didn't want Finn to know about his sudden impulse. It felt like a guilty secret, pocket change stolen from a parent's wallet.

Jesse found the book straightaway. Finn had left it on his desk, as though he himself intended to open it in the morning. If anything, the photograph was worse than Jesse remembered. Emmy had been about the same age when she died – a guess, it was hard to read the glossy corpse.

One look, then he thrust the book aside. He longed to tear the page out, rip it into pieces. He leaned over Finn's desk, grasping the wooden edge with both hands, gripping until his muscles cramped. He could feel the memories rising, his blood roaring, a river in spate which threatened to burst its banks and engulf him in flame. A hot wind blowing ashes off the roof. He's running through the garden towards the door, sobs keening in his ears. Jesse, she cries. Jesse! He swallowed, forcing back the vile taste in his mouth. Had he only imagined the stench of burnt meat and charred bone? He could never be certain. It felt like memory.

He reached for the book again and stared at the photograph. He had never got to see Emmy. If there had been anything left to see. He splayed his hand across the page, closed his eyes, fingered the sharp edge of the paper. It won't change anything, he told himself. You can tear it out of the binding, but not out of your head. But he knew that unless he left, and soon, he might not be able to check himself. His fingers tightened on the paper, sweat trickling down the sides of his chest. It was cool down here. Why was he sweating, for god's sake? It was just a *book*.

'Jesse?'

He gasped. And then that surge of fiery release, so strong that the book before him ignited.

'Jesse!'

He was fast. In a matter of seconds he'd beaten out the fire with his hands – it had only been a small one, after all. If it weren't for the faint pall of smoke, not even enough to set off the detectors, and the acrid smell, there would be no reason to imagine a fire. Except for the curled and blackened pages of the book.

Sarah stared at Jesse in utter astonishment. She looked from his face to the desk to his face again. He met her interrogation without flinching.

'Show me your hands,' she demanded. 'Are they burnt?'

He held them out. They weren't even reddened. It had really been a very small blaze.

'And the man in the park?' she asked slowly.

Jesse looked away. He'd been hoping she wouldn't be reminded of that. He kept underestimating her. What answer could he possibly give her?

Chapter 10

Sarah appeared in the kitchen just in time to peer over Finn's shoulder at the frying pans.

'Where did you find all that bacon?' she asked. 'You can't have been to the shops already.'

'Under a bag of chips that's split its guts. Somebody's going to have to defrost that deep freeze before we need an axe – or a flame-thrower.' Finn's gaze rested on Jesse for a moment as he handed Sarah two plates of scrambled eggs and mushrooms. 'What are you doing up so early anyway?' He made Nubi sit for his share of bacon. 'Turn over a new branch?'

'Leaf, you mean. As in book.'

'Nope. Forest, maybe, for the mount of paper you'd need.'

Even Nubi seemed to grin. Sarah snorted and tossed her plait over her shoulder. 'It's too early for bad jokes.'

Finn brought Jesse a heaped plate, then sat down and tucked into his own breakfast. It was only after he'd eaten several rashers of bacon and a thickly buttered slice of toast, heavy with jam, that he paused for breath. 'I've really missed good home-cooking.'

'You're going to put back all those pounds within a week,' Meg said drily.

'Now don't start with that again.' Finn turned to Sarah. 'Heard from Katy yet?'

'An email a few days ago.'

'How's it going?' Finn asked.

'Not too bad. Hot.' Sarah explained to Jesse. 'Katy's one of my best mates. She's working on an Indian reservation in Arizona for the summer holidays.'

'Native Americans,' Finn said. 'Navajo, in this case.'

Meg glanced at her bare wrist, then up at the clock.

'Don't forget your watch,' Finn said.

'It needs to be repaired.'

'What have you done? Taken a sledgehammer to it?' Sarah asked.

'Just a minor adjustment,' Meg shot a warning look at Finn, who was about to make one of his comments. 'Look, I'm going to be late if I don't hurry.' She addressed Sarah. 'I've left a shopping list and some money. Could you pick up the things we need for supper? We're going to barbecue. I'll be back by eight.' A smile. 'Truly.'

'OK.' Sarah buttered a piece of toast. 'Anything else?'

'Tell your father when you go out, and don't forget your mobile.'

Sarah made a face at her mother.

'I mean it, Sarah Louise Andersen. You must be the only teenager in the country whose ear is not permanently affixed to the phone.'

'Think of how much I'm saving you. I ought to get more pocket money.'

No stranger to such comments, Meg wiped her fingers on her napkin and laid it at her place. She turned to Jesse, her voice level, her eyes gentle. 'Do I need to say goodbye?'

Jesse ducked his head, *go* and *stay* chasing round and round in his mind like cat and dog, round and round again. He looked over at Nubi, whose opinion couldn't have been more obvious: maybe *you* prefer a bridge, but I'll take a clean mat and bacon any day. And I'd like another chance at that stuck-up, pampered feline who's begging to be taught a little respect.

Finn intervened. 'Leave the boy, Meg. He and I have got a few things to sort out.'

After breakfast Finn sent Sarah off to the newsagent by bike.

'Jesse and I will tidy the kitchen,' he said. When she scowled, he added, 'Well, you can always do the dishes at supper if you're feeling slighted. And I think Meg mentioned something about the downstairs loo. A good scrub, wasn't it?'

Sarah snorted at her father's perfidy but left the two of them alone.

'She's a good kid,' Finn said after she'd gone. 'She'll give us enough time to talk.'

Jesse said nothing.

'More coffee?' Finn asked.

Jesse shook his head.

Finn poured himself another mug, then added cream and a hefty amount of sugar. 'Meg's always after me to leave off the sweet stuff,' he despaired. 'Just this once.'

Jesse's lips twitched. He pushed back his chair. 'I'll start the washing up.'

'Afterwards,' Finn said. 'This won't take long.'

Now was the opportunity. Jesse played with the crumbs on his plate, considering how to explain.

'Let's start with the fire in my office,' Finn said.

'I was just about to tell you.' Jesse didn't like the way it made him appear, as if he'd been planning to sneak off like a pathetic coward. 'Look, I'm sorry. I'll repay you as soon as I can.'

'Don't pretend to be obtuse.'

Jesse stared at his plate for a long time. 'I guess you're not going to be satisfied with something like *spontaneous combustion*,' he finally said.

'Good guess.'

Jesse shrugged. 'I can't give you an explanation.'

'It's happened before?'

'Yeah.'

In the lengthy silence Finn wondered whether Meg had ever run into this sort of thing. And there was that research project he'd heard about, the one Ayen was directing.

'How long have you been on the run?' Finn asked.

'I'm all right. I don't need any help.'

Finn tilted his chair back onto its rear legs, folded his hands across his midriff, and regarded Jesse soberly, without a trace of pity. 'That's not what I asked you.'

'A few months.'

'A police matter?'

'No.'

'Good.' He saw Jesse's grimace. 'I have some experience with the police. They don't always get things right. How could they? But it makes things a lot easier if they're not involved.'

'I'm not wanted for anything criminal.' Mal would never have reported the damage to his models. Not after Jesse's phone call.

'How old are you?'

'Old enough to decide where I want to live, what I want to do with my life.'

'Which is?'

Jesse didn't answer.

'You don't know, do you?'

'That's my problem.'

'No, it's not. It's everyone's problem. A society is responsible for its kids.'

'An activist,' Jesse sneered.

'I've been called worse.' Finn kept his temper. 'You'll have to do a lot better than that if you want to rock me. Do you have any idea of the places I've been, the things I've seen?' Only the sharp scything motion of his hand revealed the depth of his feelings.

Jesse hunched his shoulders. There was a long deep scratch, almost a groove, on the tabletop in the shape of an irregular z, as though a child had tried to carve a lightning bolt. Jesse traced his finger along it – back and forth, back and forth.

'You know, Jesse, you're young and smart, with all your parts in working order, while I've seen kids with half a face, kids crawling on legs stunted by polio – *polio*, for god's sake, in this day and age – kids orphaned and emaciated by AIDS. And most of them tenacious little buggers who, despite having been dealt a bloody lousy hand, don't give up.' Finn gestured towards Jesse, a knife thrust. 'Look at yourself. Take a good hard look. You've got your whole life ahead of you' – he couldn't miss the contemptuous expression that crossed Jesse's face – '*your whole life*, and I don't mind repeating it, no matter how trite it sounds, because it's obvious you've no clue where to go and what to do. You're running like a car on empty. Have you got any idea – any idea whatsoever – what's likely to happen to you if you keep going?'

Jesse's chair screeched. 'I'm not going to –'

'Sit down!' Finn's voice cracked over Jesse's head, while his chair thumped back solidly onto all four legs.

The clock ticked as Jesse hesitated, a low steady pulse.

Jesse sat. Sometimes it was easiest to wait things out. He didn't have to listen – he'd heard it all a million times before.

But Finn had finished. He drank his coffee. He went to the kettle and filled it, plugged it in. He fussed with coffee beans and electric grinder and filter. He began to wash the frying pans. The smell of fresh coffee wafted across the room. Jesse looked through the open kitchen door to where Nubi lay on a sunny patch of lawn, gnawing on a stick. The sundial winked from its pool. It took Jesse a few minutes longer to work out that Finn would clean the entire kitchen, if necessary – and paint it too – before saying another word. An unusual man, Jesse had said to Sarah. He wondered if she understood just how unusual.

‘Finn?’

Sarah’s father brought the coffee pot to the table and sat down. This time Jesse accepted a refill.

‘I’d like to hear what you have to say,’ Jesse said.

Finn leaned his elbows on the table. He took his time, tapping his fingers against his lips and staring off into space. Liam used to do that – retreat into his own head at odd moments. It was one of the first things Jesse had noticed about him, and in time Jesse had come to understand how painful – *physically* painful – the world of assessments and bureaucracy and parents and sarky kids and pretence could be for him. In his blackest moods Liam had said that sex was his only release, his sole escape from himself. They had never spoken of love.

Then Finn asked an unexpected question. ‘Have you ever ridden a motorbike?’

Jesse shook his head.

‘Would you like to learn?’

‘I’ve never really thought about it,’ Jesse said warily. ‘I suppose so. Why?’

‘Motorcycle journeys have a way of travelling into the past as well as the future.’

‘Pirsig. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.’

Finn whistled in appreciation. ‘You really have done a lot of reading.’

‘An old paperback I picked up somewhere.’

Finn tapped some more with his fingers. ‘Tell me, Jesse, just how good is your memory, exactly?’

There was no point in false modesty with this man. ‘Good.’

Finn picked up his mug and swirled the hot coffee round, blew on it, but set it down again without drinking.

‘Pirsig has his flaws, but I like the motorcycle metaphor, and some of the fundamental questions he raises haven’t changed. Maybe they never do. Meg thinks me mad, but I find biking exhilarating – empowering even. I get most of my best ideas when biking. If a really tough problem is plaguing me, I try to get out on my Harley.’ Then he grinned. ‘Of course, it’s also great fun.’

Jesse visualised a beach, seabirds, waves. ‘Do you ever go as far as the coast?’

‘It’s not even a hard afternoon’s ride. Longer, of course, if you want to enjoy the beauty of the countryside.’ Finn chuckled. ‘Pirsig’s secondary roads.’

‘I was planning to make my way there. I’ve never been to the sea.’

‘That can be arranged. I’d love to introduce you to biking.’

Jesse drank some of his coffee, uncertain how to react.

‘Look, here’s our proposal,’ Finn said. ‘Stay the rest of the summer with us. We’ve got plenty of room. It’s only a month or so till school begins. Take some time to think about who you are, what you want. No strings attached. You’ll be free to come and go as you please – well, within the normal limits of a home.’

‘You don’t even know me. Why would you offer me something like this?’

Finn’s gaze shifted inward for a moment. Then he sighed, blinking rapidly. ‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘Not to me.’

‘Because you need it.’

Jesse waved a hand towards the kitchen door and passage beyond. ‘I don’t see a whole lot of other indigents lodged here.’

Finn stared unflinchingly at Jesse, who suddenly found he couldn’t look away. His hands began to tremble, so that he was forced to grip the edges of his chair seat. Finn leaned forward and still would not release him.

‘What will it be, Jesse? The future or the past? You’re going to have to chose. Sure you’ve had a tough time. Anyone can see that, not just Meg. But it’s not a life sentence. Or it doesn’t have to be.’

With an effort Jesse averted his eyes. An unbidden picture of his family, their last meal together. One of his mother’s roast chickens. He can taste the crisp brown skin that Emmy won’t eat. He can taste the cold lager with its head of foam from which he’s allowed to sip. And the other taste, the one mingling with the smell of sweat and the sound of harsh loud breaths, hot against his neck. Again, and again. Will it never end? Pain – hot and fierce – flays his back, his shoulders, his throat. Jesse! Where are you? It’s hot. Jesse!

‘Jesse.’

Jesse tore himself away from the memory. ‘I can’t –’ His voice splintered. Then brokenly, ashes of the past clogging his throat, dry chalky whispers, ‘There was a fire.’

‘I thought there must have been.’

‘You’ve got no idea. None at all!’ Jesse cried. ‘I killed them ...’

Finn’s sea-blue eyes washed over him with unbearable kindness.

‘I killed them ...’ The anguish in his voice sliced through the slowly rising waves like a dragon-head.

‘It hurts, I know.’

The bone-cage tightened around Jesse’s head. He gasped, then his throat and lungs constricted. All colour bleached from the room, and the room began to pitch. He rose, grasping the table for support. It was only a few steps to the garden. Air, he just needed some fresh air. Breathe, he told himself. But there was no air. His face was cold. He floated outside his skin. He saw himself start to slide, saw Finn stand and catch him, saw them enter the whiteout together.

Jesse opened his eyes to find Finn sitting next to him on the bed, looking worried.

‘Jesse?’ Finn said. ‘Are you all right? You gave me a bit of a fright.’

Jesse scanned the room – no flames, no blackened timbers, no skeletons. An ordinary bedroom – prosaic, safe. The way he’d left it this morning. At the edge of his vision something stirred. His eyes darted towards the corner. No ghosts.

‘What happened?’ Jesse asked. ‘How did I get here?’

‘You fainted so I carried you upstairs.’

‘How long was I out?’

‘Only a few minutes. Sarah’s not even back yet.’

Jesse sank back against the pillow. He closed his eyes against the bright sunlight, glad that Meg hadn't been here to take over. At Finn's next words he snapped them open again.

'I think you need a thorough check-up. Just to make sure nothing's wrong.'

'I'm not HIV-positive, if that's what you're afraid of.'

'That was the furthest thing from my mind.'

'I'm fine,' Jesse insisted. 'I don't drink, I don't do drugs, I eat.'

Finn smiled. 'True, you've got a healthy appetite. But I'd feel better if you at least let Meg have a look at you.'

'No!'

Finn regarded him for a moment, then dropped his hand briefly onto Jesse's shoulder before getting to his feet. A chess player, Finn knew that it was sometimes expedient to sacrifice a piece.

'Who's Emmy?' he asked.

'How do you know about Emmy?'

'You said her name as you were coming round.'

Jesse hesitated. 'She was my sister.'

'The fire?'

Jesse nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

A burst of high-pitched laughter through the open window, a shout of *my turn*. Some little girls were playing in the neighbouring garden. Higher, Jesse, push me higher! Jesse swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. His head felt light, but there was no dizziness. He rubbed his hands through his hair.

'I'll clear up in the kitchen,' Jesse said.

'Leave it for now. I want you to take it easy.'

'Stop worrying. It was only –' Jesse broke off, unwilling to continue.

Finn bent to pick up a jumper that had slipped to the floor. He shook it out slowly and draped it over the foot of the bed.

'It's OK,' Finn said. 'When you're ready to talk about the fire, I'll be there to listen. Be patient with yourself, Jesse. Be *good* to yourself. You've been on the road for a while now. You're exhausted – mentally, physically. Emotionally. Give yourself the chance to build up your reserves.'

'Maybe ... just a day or two.'

They heard a door slam and Nubi's welcoming bark. Sarah was back.

'I suppose Sarah will want to go out. Don't let her drag you along if you're not up to it. She can be rather overbearing sometimes. Nobody will mind in the least if you decide to spend the day in bed or lazing in the sun or reading,' Finn said.

'I think I'd like to visit a library,' Jesse ventured.

'No problem. Sarah can take you.'

'And maybe ask round for some work.'

Finn looked thoughtful. 'Let me see what I can do.' He tugged at his beard for a short while, ten seconds, twenty, then grinned and punched the air like a lad. 'Got it! Ever seen a narrowboat?'

Jesse marvelled at the ease he felt in the older man's company. He would have done anything for a foster father like Finn. Then Jesse realised the direction of his thoughts. Shit. He remembered with bitterness the first

foster home, then the next. A new start: a kid's sad little promise to himself. He'd still wanted to make it work in those early years. It had taken him a while, but he'd learned. Altruism was about as likely as time travel. And even kindness had its limits.

So why the fuck was he doing it again?

Chapter 11

Sarah chased her father out of the kitchen with an egg whisk.

‘Jesse and I will tidy up. I know you’re dying to get to work.’

Finn eyed the small pool forming at Sarah’s feet, then chewed his bottom lip without looking directly at Jesse. ‘Well –’

‘Go on, we’ll take care of it,’ Jesse said, reaching for the roll of paper towels. ‘I’m OK,’ he added firmly.

The dishwasher was midway through a cycle, chortling ghoulishly to itself. Nubi had taken one look at the machine and retreated again to the garden. Who knew what it might eat next?

Sarah tossed the whisk into the sink. ‘Let’s just rinse the breakfast things. We can stack them on the worktop till the dishwasher’s empty.’

‘These few dishes?’ Jesse scoffed. ‘It won’t take us more than ten minutes. I don’t fancy leaving the kitchen untidy.’

Sarah could tell from the set of his shoulders that he would do it alone if she refused. And she didn’t care for the impudent glint in his eyes. Think her spoiled, did he? She began to run hot water into the sink, then went to the table to collect plates and mugs.

‘Come down when you’ve finished, and I’ll give you the laptop,’ Finn said from the doorway.

‘Laptop?’ Sarah asked. ‘Not your spare?’

‘I told Jesse he could use it.’

‘Finn! I’ve asked you and asked you!’

‘You know the new PC’s always available,’ Finn said.

‘Yeah right. When Mum’s not hogging it, you mean.’

‘I don’t want to cause any problems,’ Jesse said.

‘No problem, Jesse,’ Finn said.

Sarah flounced to the sink and began to crash plates and mugs together, her plait swinging with petulance. Bloody male bonding. Jesse wouldn’t answer any of her questions about his weird talents, but she bet he’d told Finn plenty.

‘Hold on,’ said Jesse, ‘let me wash. You can dry.’

Finn beat the classic hasty retreat while Sarah and Jesse argued over who was more likely to break things. Once they’d settled the issue, they worked quickly and well together, though the air still held a few more charged particles than strictly necessary. It didn’t take them long to finish. Sarah was filling ice cube trays when Jesse balled the J-cloth he’d been using to wipe the tabletop and tossed it into the sink, just missing the tip of her nose.

‘Jesus! Now my T-shirt’s soaked,’ Sarah exclaimed. ‘I’d hate to see you with a basketball.’

‘If I’d intended to hit you, I would have.’

Arms akimbo, she glared at him for a moment. ‘Awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you?’ Then, poised on the cusp of a grin, she raised an eyebrow. ‘Or

maybe you did that on purpose. Like Kevin would have, to highlight my nipples.'

Jesse coloured and bent to pick up a stray piece of eggshell, then straightened with an apologetic gesture. 'Sarah, please don't be cross with me. I wish you hadn't seen that business with the fire, but you have, and I can't change it. It's just not something I'm ready to talk about.'

Her expression softened. 'Maybe when you know me better.'

'Maybe.' He looked round for a broom. 'We ought to do the floor. It's full of crumbs and dog hair.'

'Later. It's too nice to stay indoors.'

The doorbell rang.

'Go fetch the damn laptop while I see who it is,' Sarah said.

Jesse was busy in the office for twenty minutes while Finn cleared some old files and explained how to operate the computer. Jesse listened politely, though it was all patently obvious. Finn's model was a little outdated, but perfectly serviceable, or would be once Jesse made a few modifications.

Climbing the stairs from the darkroom, Jesse heard low voices and Sarah's laugh from the direction of the sitting room. Talk slowed to a halt as Jesse entered the room. Mick, Kevin, and Tondi were clustered in a knot around Sarah. There was an awkward pause.

'Look who's here,' drawled Mick, his eyes travelling from Jesse's bare feet to his tousled hair. Mick winked at Sarah, but his eyes were cold. 'You didn't tell us you had company.'

Sarah dropped her gaze and shifted from foot to bare foot, at last arching the left into an improbable crescent and tracing half-circles on the floor with stork-like grace. She couldn't be clumsy if she tried. Jesse asked himself if she were embarrassed by his own presence or Mick's taunt. Tightening his lips, he set the laptop on the floor and moved to her side. Though his heart was racing, he forced himself to show nothing but cool disdain. Sarah settled into a quiet stance but kept her eyes downcast, and her discomfiture fuelled his anger. Up close her skin smelled warm and faintly yeasty, like a new-baked loaf. A pulse beat suddenly in Jesse's throat. He must have communicated something to her, for she stiffened slightly. Her arm brushed his – a prickling of the hairs along his skin.

'Want to do a little skating?' Jesse asked in a voice he himself hardly recognised.

Mick grinned but a muscle in his temple jumped. 'Not today, Jesse boy, not today. We're going to the club pool.' His glance barely flicked towards Sarah. 'Ready, Sar?'

'I – I don't know. It's awfully early yet,' she said, her eyes still on her feet.

'Just got out of bed?' Mick smirked.

The others laughed. No way, thought Jesse, no bloody way.

'I'm afraid we've got other plans.' Jesse's voice was quiet and pleasant and regretful. He might have been refusing an invitation to tea. 'Another time, perhaps. Like next year. Or next century.' He spoke without the merest trace of sarcasm. 'You do know the word *century*?'

The mocking smile faded from Mick's lips. The room stilled, then shivered; the challenge had driven summer from the air. Slowly Sarah raised her head to regard Mick. Something like pity, something like derision

glittered in her eyes. With an oath Mick jutted out his chin, took a step forward, and grabbed Jesse roughly by the arm.

'Why you little wanker,' he said. 'Go back to whatever fucking hole you've crawled out of.'

Kevin looked uneasy. He put a hand on his friend's arm. 'Come on, Mick, chill.'

Mick shrugged Kevin off without releasing his hold on Jesse.

'Freak,' Mick spat at Jesse.

The word twisted like a blade of ice in Jesse's gut. A deep breath, he told himself, take a deep breath. They're only words. Who cares what these apes think? Let it go. *Cunt. Weirdo. Pisshead.* You've heard them all. *Fucker. Cumbag.* The band around his skull began to tighten. *Perver.* A sudden weight on his shoulder made him turn his head – Finn's hand warm and heavy there. Jesse felt himself grow taller, broader.

'Take your hand off me,' Jesse said, his voice icy. 'Right now.'

Tondi watched Jesse with interest, a smile playing on her lips. Even on a hot summer day she wore a shiny red gloss of lipstick, plenty of kohl.

Two patches of red splotched Mick's cheeks like frostburn. He sneered but a shadow of uncertainty scuttled out from beneath his bravado. Jesse smiled at the sight, he'd had enough Mals to last him a lifetime. Steely, flame blue, his eyes held Mick's. At first imperceptibly, soon forcefully, Jesse drove a fire-forged tip through the cocky carapace. Mick's fingers tightened on Jesse's arm, gouging deep furrows. Deeper still. Mick hissed and dropped his gaze.

The room began to stir.

'Mick, I think you'd better go,' Sarah said. 'I don't want to have to call my father.'

To warm.

Mick flung Jesse's arm away, swallowing a curse under his breath. He pivoted and left without a backward glance. Sarah said nothing as the others muttered goodbye. In the doorway Tondi turned, hooked her thumbs into her waistband, and flashed Jesse a look which melted the last splitters of ice in the air.

'You're going out with him?' Jesse asked.

Sarah and Jesse were sitting on a grassy embankment by the river. Nubi lay next to them, wet and panting. He swam easily, joyfully, chasing waterfowl and sandpipers in a great thrashing of water, though he came out willingly enough when reprimanded. The sky overhead was a brilliant blue whose glassy clarity magnified the heat.

Sarah took a long sip of her coke. Jesse watched her surreptitiously, enjoying the slender line of her throat as she tilted her head back. Her collarbone seemed sharp enough to tear her thinly gilded skin, and a few freckles chased the swell of her chest into her skimpy top. He averted his eyes, he felt vulnerable at her easygoing attitude towards her body.

'It's not what you think,' Sarah said.

Jesse shrugged, not trusting himself to speak. Sarah and Mick – Jesse had wanted to be wrong. What could she see in someone like that? He turned his head and stared at the river. None of his business, after all.

‘Jesse, look at me.’

Reluctantly, Jesse turned in her direction, combed his fingers through his hair. Sarah thought how fine and silken it looked, like a child’s, and her fingers itched for a hairbrush. A golden mane, streaked with many subtle shadings, and bleached almost to white at the tips by the sun – Joseph’s coat in yellow.

‘You don’t owe me an explanation,’ Jesse said.

‘You’re right, I don’t. But I’d like to tell you, if you’ll listen.’

Jesse emptied his own can of coke, then crushed it in his hand. ‘OK, tell me about it.’

Sarah wrapped her arms round her knees. ‘I went out with him a few times. We weren’t really a couple. I’m pretty sure he was seeing other girls at the same time. He said he wasn’t but you know how it is. He probably thought I’d be jealous or possessive or something.’

‘And you wouldn’t have been?’

‘Hardly. I wasn’t in love with him, nothing like that. I wasn’t even sure how much I liked him.’

‘But you went out with him,’ Jesse snapped. ‘Slept with someone, I suppose, you didn’t even like.’

‘And you haven’t?’ retorted Sarah, stung by his contempt.

‘No.’

Sarah was quiet for a time.

‘You haven’t slept with anyone yet, have you?’

He picked at a loose thread on his jeans. ‘Not in the way you mean.’

Sarah exhaled in a long soft sigh. She shaded her face with a hand and looked out over the river, where the sunlight dazzled the eye through a spell of mirrors. She had to squint to see the boats trawling past. This part of the river was always heavily trafficked.

‘He was my first,’ Sarah said. ‘He’s good-looking and popular, and just about all the girls fancy him. I was flattered by his attention, I suppose. You’ve seen an ugly side of him. He can be very funny ... sweet. OK, he’s a bit spoilt, a bit egotistic. So are most blokes with that kind of charisma. And I think there might be something with his father. Mick has a twin brother, Daniel, who got into a lot of trouble over dealing, they sent him off to some uncle or cousin in South Africa to sort him out, he hasn’t been back since. They were always terribly close, Mick and Dan, and Mick changed after his brother left. But he’s usually not quite so nasty. I don’t know what got into him today.’

Jesse snorted.

Sarah ignored his interruption. ‘Why not, I thought. Time to find out what everyone raves about. It’s not like I’m going to get pregnant or anything. And Mick’s the sort to know what he’s doing.’ She fiddled with her plait. ‘It seemed smart to have a go with someone I didn’t care that much about, didn’t want to get involved with.’

‘I thought it’s supposed to be the other way around.’

‘Well, believe me, it doesn’t always happen like that.’

'If you say so.' Jesse looked away. The pictures in his head were vivid, too vivid. He picked up the discarded can and crushed it even smaller. She was seated close enough for him to smell the lavender on her hair, the not unpleasant tang of sweat, of soap and warmth – of Sarahness. To hear her soft breathing. To see her long limbs, the smooth effortless strokes. Her breasts, nipples puckering in the water. She's swimming dreamily towards him. Mermaid hair, floating free. A cascade of bubbles from her lips. How close she is, how close. And then thrashing, Mick's shark mouth, his hands ...

'Was it good?' The question burst out of him.

She looked at him with an unreadable expression.

'You said he can be fun ...' His voice trailed off. Abruptly he scrambled to his feet and began to strip off his shoes and socks, then his jeans. Finn had found him old trunks. 'I'm going for a swim.'

'What, here?' Sarah asked, surprised by the sudden change of topic. 'I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Why not? Too polluted?'

'No. The currents are treacherous. Much stronger than they look. Warnings are posted everywhere.' Sarah waved her hand in the direction of a signpost. 'No one swims here.'

'I'm a good swimmer, I told you.'

'Jesse, if you really want to swim, let's go to the pool.'

'So we can meet Mick?'

Sarah's spine tillered hard up. 'That's low.'

'Is it? Somehow your version of the story seems rather pat. You go skateboarding with him. He comes sniffing round the house. Looks to me –'

Sarah interrupted him angrily. 'It looks to me as if you'd better get some real-life experience before you start judging other people.'

They glowered at each other for a moment before Jesse tossed down his jeans and sprinted towards the water without removing his T-shirt. Nubi sprang up and raced to join him. Sarah gnawed her lip, then the tail of her plait. She had something of her father's quick temper, and more often than not regretted her rash words as soon as she'd uttered them. Which didn't alter the fact that she was right about the river.

'Where did you learn to swim like that?' Sarah asked.

'I grew up by a lake,' he said reluctantly. He'd swum in all but the coldest weather.

'What happened?' she asked softly. 'To your family?'

He turned away from her towards the river. She saw the loneliness in the sweep of his eyelashes, the pearly delicacy of his ear, the still curve of his mouth. If she'd dared, she would have put her arms around him. Instead she crossed them over her chest, hugging her thoughts to herself.

'They died.' His mouth tightened, and he said no more.

After collecting their things Sarah explained how to get to the boatyard. Then she dug into her pocket for money. Jesse shook his head.

'Jesse, my mother left it for both of us. Get yourself something to eat.'

He stood mute, his mouth a stubborn slash in his face.

‘Christ, you’re pig-headed.’

‘Finn fixed it that the bloke pays me straightaway.’

‘And you’ll be back for supper?’

‘Your parents really do seem to want me to stay for a while.’ His tone was offhand, and he raised a shoulder as if resigned to the vagaries of adults, but Sarah wasn’t fooled in the least.

She hesitated, then looked straight at him, into that wonderful unsafe blue. ‘I’d like it too.’

Sarah saw the leap of happiness in his eyes before he bent to pull on his jeans. God, but he was a contradiction! A savage tenderness stung her eyes, clogged her throat. What was the matter with people? Why foster someone only to do this to him? She would cheerfully throttle the bastard. And whoever else had had a hand in robbing Jesse of his birthright. He owned so little – only what he could carry about inside himself. She wished she could convince him it was enough, more than enough. She thought of Mick. All his charm – and all the newest gear – wouldn’t cover up his selfishness, his shallowness. Why hadn’t she noticed before?

Chapter 12

The sun was hot on Jesse's shoulders as he walked along the river. It had the same decisive quality as Finn's arm – it knew its worth, it knew what it had to offer. Jesse quickened his step. He was already hungry, but the lightness was a gift. Thin-beaten as gold leaf, his bones stretched and pulled his flesh into new, daring dimensions. For the first time in months he was not thinking about his next meal, not looking over his shoulder for shadows.

The tiny boatyard was crammed between a much larger operation on one side and a riverside pub on the other. At the entrance Jesse stopped and drank from his water bottle, then combed back his hair with his fingertips, tugged his T-shirt into shape, and wiped his hands on his jeans. This must be the place Sarah meant.

A lone man was at work on an ancient narrowboat, scraping down its hull, while a Siberian husky with startling blue eyes lay nearby in the shade of a beach umbrella. Thin to the point of emaciation and completely bald, the man laboured at his task with a concentration that lit the air around him with a frail glow which brightened when his attention sharpened and then faded again soon afterwards, though never entirely disappearing. He wore only a pair of stained green trousers and sturdy trekking sandals, and his sweat-streaked torso was covered by a mass of tattoos. Jesse watched him for a time, and if the man were aware of the scrutiny, he gave no sign. Jesse couldn't take his eyes from the images on the man's skin, for they were composed of words – lines and lines of words – rather than pictures; a kind of living book or journal, which from his vantage point Jesse was unable to read. The man had only one arm.

At last Jesse roused himself to approach. The man left off scraping and observed him without a single word. The dog rose from its belly but showed no other signs of alarm.

Working on the boat was the sort of thing Jesse liked to do – strenuous enough to release tension, yet with an ebb and flow that left his mind free to drift.

Up close, Jesse could see that the man was at most in his early twenties. It had been his air of utter self-containment that had made him appear older – and something in his face, a fine silvering of pain like the patina of weathered teak or poplar.

Jesse recognised only one quotation on the man's skin – biblical; most of the other tattoos were unfamiliar poems, perhaps composed by the man himself. Jesse tried to read one spectacular text done in reds and oranges and purples, and arranged in a spiral around the man's navel, but it was difficult to make out all the words without craning, and he didn't like to appear too nosy. Though the man must surely be used to it by now.

The man waited until Jesse stood right before him. He was neither friendly nor unfriendly, simply patient. Observant. Jesse came to a halt and cleared his throat, uncertain whether to offer his hand or his purpose.

'I've written them myself,' the man said. 'Best to get that out of the way, I find.'

'I expect that's what most people ask.'

'Not at all. The few who inquire want to know why I've chosen words rather than pictures.'

The man mopped his forehead with a paisley zandana from his pocket.

'Are you Matthew?' Jesse asked.

'You must be the lad Finn sent. Come inside,' he said. 'I'll make us a cup of tea.'

Inside proved to be the cool interior of a rather large shed.

Matthew set a kettle of water to boil over an electric ring. 'All the amenities,' he said, pointing to a small refrigerator. Jesse's eyes lit up at the sight of the chocolate gateau Matthew produced. He cut off a thick slice and handed it to Jesse on a plate, then extended a jug of assorted cutlery.

'Go ahead,' Matthew said. 'Milk?'

Jesse nodded. He was becoming used to Matthew's clipped accents, rather abrupt manner.

There were two folding chairs and a small but handsome wooden table. Jesse took one of the seats and began to eat. Matthew filled a bowl with milk for his dog while the tea steeped.

'Aren't you having any?' asked Jesse when he'd finished most of his slice.

Matthew didn't answer, just passed him a mug of strong milky tea and another piece of cake. Then he sipped his own tea, taking it black, and regarded Jesse over the rim of his mug.

'I'm dying, you know. That's why I'm so thin.'

Jesse choked on his tea.

'No point in pretending,' Matthew added.

'AIDS?' Jesse finally asked when he realised that his was the next move.

Matthew shook his head. 'Cancer.'

A short silence.

'Is this your own boatyard? Finn didn't say.'

'My uncle's.'

Jesse looked round. The workshop was scrupulously clean and tidy, with smaller hand tools hanging from pegs along one wall; ropes, cable, and chains from hooks; and the worktables bare except for one or two current projects. The smell of wood and sawdust and varnish were as familiar to him as his own sweat. A few large power tools stood on stands, and different planks of wood were sorted in specially constructed vertical storage racks. There were shelves for paints and varnishes, bins and cabinets for everything else. At the far end a dinghy shell was under construction. Sink and wood-burning stove. A narrow cleated gangplank led to a storage loft, and a trolley loaded with crates waited to be wheeled up. Jesse could easily imagine working in such a snug place.

'And the narrowboat?' Jesse asked. 'It's very beautiful.'

'Yes, she is, isn't she? I've had her since I was nineteen. It's now or never.'

'To restore her?'

‘And if I’m really lucky, to take her out and live on her for as long as I’m able. And if I can get away with it, to die on her.’ Matthew spoke in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

‘You seem so –’ Jesse searched for the right word to express his twist of feelings – dismay, pity, bewilderment, awe, fear. He tasted a cold clear mouthful of lakewater, a draught so icy that it burnt like knowledge.

‘I savour my life,’ Matthew said.

‘You’re not afraid ... or angry?’

‘Sometimes. I wouldn’t be human if I weren’t.’ He indicated his missing arm. ‘This helped prepare me.’

‘Your cancer?’

‘No, an accident when I was a kid. You learn a lot about yourself then.’

Jesse rubbed a hand over the back of his neck.

‘Have you ever worked with wood?’ Matthew asked. Then he grimaced, and a film of sweat sprang up on his forehead, his scalp. ‘Sorry. Wait a moment, will you?’ He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, breathing deeply, his ribs ridging like rocky shoals above the rise and fall of his thin chest. His face had paled. Jesse could hear the air being drawn through his nostrils, the harsh struggle with pain.

After a while some colour returned to Matthew’s face. He waited still longer before opening his eyes, then rose and fetched a bottle of tablets from a shelf above the sink, which he handed to Jesse.

‘Since you’re here, you might as well open it for me,’ Matthew said.

‘Painkillers?’

‘Yes.’

‘They work?’

‘More or less. I’m not quite ready to capitulate just yet.’ A grin. ‘To morphine.’

Jesse stared at Matthew for a moment, not stirring. What harm could it do, he asked himself. He was good with pain. Then he shivered. No. Don’t get involved. It’s too risky. Stick to animals. He felt the first flicker of panic in his gut. No. I can’t. If it goes wrong ... Matthew raised his eyebrows. ‘If you have a problem with opening the bottle ...’

‘It’s not that.’ Jesse licked his lips. ‘I wonder – I mean, there’s something I could try. Only if you’re willing. It’s been a long time, and I’m not really sure... OK, it might help.’

‘I’m going to need an interpreter here.’

Jesse laughed mirthlessly. ‘Never mind. It wasn’t a good idea anyway.’

Matthew pulled out his chair and sat down again.

‘What?’ he asked.

Jesse’s eyes fell upon the line tattooed across Matthew’s left breast. He winced, thinking of Finn. There were only a few words, an extract, but enough for him to have identified the source.

Matthew saw the direction of Jesse’s gaze. *‘And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing ...’*

‘You’re religious?’ Jesse asked.

Matthew shrugged. ‘In my own way.’

'Then why the quotation? First Corinthians, isn't it?'

'You know the passage?'

'I read,' Jesse said. 'All sorts of stuff, including the Bible.'

'What else have we got in this life?'

'The Bible, you mean? Religion?'

'No,' Matthew spoke so quietly that Jesse had to strain to hear him. 'Love.'

Jesse's fist tightened on the bottle in his hand. He could hear his grandmother chuckling softly. Her hands are busy with her knitting, the fine creamy mohair falling from her fingers like knotted dreams. Jesse set the bottle on the table in front of him.

'I might be able to help you with the pain,' Jesse said.

Matthew studied Jesse's face.

'How?' he asked. 'Acupressure, reflexology, something like that? It won't do any good. I've tried them all.'

Jesse shook his head. 'I can't explain it. You'll have to trust me.'

The refrigerator hummed a quickening bass note. As Jesse laid his hands on Matthew's shoulders, he could smell the sharp resinous odour of new-sawn wood.

Chapter 13

One token knock, then Sarah marched into Jesse's room carrying a mug of tea, a book, and an air of mischief.

'Wake up, lazybones.' She settled on the edge of the bed and held out the mug. 'Come on, drink up.'

Jesse groaned artfully and burrowed further under the covers. Sarah was having none of that. She set the mug down on the bedside table, and with a giggle that hinted at practice, pounced on precisely the right spot to induce a muffled roar. Jesse thrust his head out from under his duvet, pulled her down onto the bed, and began to tickle her till she begged for a truce. They lay next to each other companionably while Sarah caught her breath.

'Pass me the tea,' Jesse said as he winched himself into a sitting position, resigned to foregoing his lie-in. It was still a lot better than waking up stiff and hungry on a piece of cardboard. A whole lot better. Had it really been less than a week since he'd slept under a bridge?

'I've brought up Finn's copy of Rilke.' She wrinkled her nose. 'It's in German, so I thought you could find that poem for me. *Autumn Day*, you said.'

Rather than take the book, Jesse quoted softly, '*He who is alone now, will remain alone ... will wander the streets restlessly ...*' His voice trailed off, and for a moment he was still, gazing into his mug. Then he looked up to find her eyes on him. 'I'll write out a translation for you, if you're interested.'

While he drank, Sarah tilted her head and regarded him critically.

'Don't you want me to trim your hair?' she asked. He raised an eyebrow so she added, 'I'm good at it, honestly. Katy and I do each other's all the time.'

Jesse squinted at her hair in return. Wild tendrils were already escaping from an elastic.

'Is that supposed to be an argument for or against?' he asked.

Sarah snorted.

'Why are you so anxious to hack at my head with a scissors anyway? A Delilah complex?'

'You're having lunch in the city with Finn. Have you forgotten?'

'So?' he asked, an expression of studied innocence on his face.

'Well, your hair is just a little –' she broke off with a glare when she realised that he was teasing her. 'Right, go around looking like a savage for all I care.'

'Shall I show you savage?'

At the ensuing sounds Nubi, who'd been ignoring all of the banter up till now, rose and shook himself, padded over to them. His kindly face looked so puzzled that both Jesse and Sarah began to laugh again.

'Do you want to me to take him for a walk this afternoon?' Sarah asked. 'While you're in the city buying out all the shops? I've got nothing to do till my evening dance class.'

‘What time is it now?’ Jesse asked.

‘Just gone ten.’

‘I haven’t slept this long in ages.’ He thought back to his weekends at Mal’s house. On Saturdays he’d been expected to wash the car and sweep the path by noon. *They* had dozed while he fixed Sunday breakfast before church. Though to be fair, Angie had always cooked a bang-up Sunday dinner – a roast, and pudding too. She worked long hours, he remembered with a flicker of guilt. He was beginning to wonder why he’d resented her quite so much. And she’d taken his side against Mal sometimes – not often, but it mustn’t have been easy to do.

Go and feed Nubi,’ he said, ‘while I brush my teeth. Then fetch your infamous scissors. But I’m warning you, any blood drawn will be taken out in kind.’

‘Just wait and see. You won’t recognise yourself.’

‘That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.’

Grinning, Sarah took the mug from his hand. Their fingers brushed, and both of them suddenly fell silent.

Sarah could hear his breathing. She could feel the heat rising from his pores and smell his brackish night musk. They stared at each other. Jesse made a small sound at the back of his throat, a sound very much like soft rain.

Like Peter, Jesse had wonderful eyes.

Her family had spent most holidays in Norway, often at her grandmother’s country house. Sarah loved to walk along the beach above the rocky headland – once the sea took hold, it refused to let go. Its colours were subtle, and hoarded pirate treasure, and shifted endlessly, never once the same.

Jesse had the most beautiful eyes she’d ever seen.

‘I want to tell you about my brother,’ she said, trying not to think of the letter. ‘Peter.’

Jesse sat up straighter, and the blue top rolled out from the bedclothes onto the floor. Sarah bent and picked it up, then examined it with a look of disbelief on her face.

‘This is Peter’s,’ she said. ‘He never went anywhere without it.’

‘Your mother gave it to me.’

‘She *gave* you Peter’s top?’

‘What’s the matter? Why has nobody mentioned your brother?’

‘He’s dead.’

‘You’ve had a haircut,’ Tondi said.

She was wearing a thin floral skirt, cut asymmetrically, and a chaste white T-shirt. Jesse could tell that she’d put on a bra. Her streaked hair was caught up in a clip, and if she wore any makeup it was skilfully applied. She looked clean and wholesome, like a film stereotype.

‘Sarah’s not here,’ Jesse said.

‘I didn’t come to see Sarah,’ she said with a smile. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me in?’

Without waiting for an answer, she propped her umbrella against the wall and brushed past him into the house. Jesse followed her into the sitting room, where she stood looking at the framed black-and-white photographs: sensual and somewhat disturbing abstracts grouped along an entire wall. They were extraordinarily beautiful – museum quality, Jesse thought.

‘I’ve always wondered what these are supposed to be,’ Tondi said.

Jesse shrugged, unwilling to engage in conversation with her. She made him uncomfortable. He moved over to the coffee table and began straightening the magazines and newspapers that were scattered higgledy-piggledy across its surface. Finn’s presence hadn’t improved the state of the house – it was rather worse, in fact. He’d brought not just the latest photo journals, but a whole stack of political and economic reviews with him from the airport – in several languages, Jesse noted – along with boxes of Swiss chocolates that were still pyramided on the seat of an armchair.

‘Got a diet coke?’ Tondi asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Jesse. ‘It’s not my house.’

‘But you’re staying here, aren’t you?’

Jesse was tempted to tell her to clear off, but he didn’t know just what her relationship to Sarah was. He didn’t like Tondi or the company she kept, nor did he trust her, but if these were Sarah’s friends ... He supposed it would do no harm to fetch her a drink.

‘Yeah, I’m staying for a while.’

‘Are you a relative? You know, a cousin or something?’

‘No.’

‘A friend of the family then?’

‘No.’

‘Something to do with her work? Sarah’s mum, I mean.’

‘No.’

‘A ghost?’ She crinkled her eyes and smiled.

Jesse laughed. OK, he was being a bit of a dickhead. She did have a nice smile, actually.

‘I’ll go and see if there’s any coke in the fridge.’

She followed him into the kitchen, which he’d just finished tidying. The room looked cheerful despite the persistent drizzle. There was a large bunch of early sunflowers in a jug on the table, to which a few drops of moisture still clung. Meg must have cut them before leaving for work. Jesse smiled to himself. The house might be messy and disorganised, but never tawdry. Only the weekly cleaner seemed to touch the Hoover. ‘I prefer my spade,’ Meg had said unabashedly. It occurred to him that he would enjoy helping her in the garden. Though he’d resented any of the garden work assigned by his foster families, he remembered helping his grandmother weed the vegetables. He liked the feel of the crumbly black earth between his fingers, the hot sun on his neck.

‘Where’s your dog?’ Tondi asked as she sipped her lemonade. There had been no coke.

‘Sarah’s taken him for a run. And I’m going out soon,’ he said.

‘Any place special?’

‘Not really. Why?’

'I thought we might go round while Sarah's with Mick.' She looked at him coyly over the rim of her glass as she took another sip, then licked her lips. 'Show you where everybody hangs out.' She kept her eyes on his face as she finished the lemonade.

Jesse's heart fisted against his breastbone. Sarah and Mick? Sarah hadn't said anything. But then she wouldn't, would she? No wonder she was so keen to get him, Jesse, out of the way. To his chagrin he could feel a wave of heat suffusing his skin.

'Didn't Sarah tell you?' Tondi asked him, her blue eyes wide and innocent.

Tondi was cleverer than she looked. She was enjoying his discomfiture. Suddenly he wanted to be rid of her, rid of them all. He felt as though he'd tread in something disgusting. Early on, there'd been mornings when the reek had awakened him, as if the drunks had deliberately chosen to spew up at his feet, to take special delight in debasing anyone at their mercy. A kid, a nothing.

Jesse reached for his cigarettes lying on the worktop. He shook one out and lit it without offering the packet to Tondi. After inhaling a few times to dispel the memory of that sour smell, he stared at her coldly. Then he remembered the no-smoking rule, took one last drag, and pinched the tip out with spit-moistened fingers. He smiled his practised quarter-smile, the one with flared nostrils.

'Sorry, Tondi, not interested.'

She raised her chin. 'No problem. It was Kevin's idea anyway. He'll be waiting for me.'

'You're a bad liar.'

Her eyes snapped with fury. She wasn't accustomed to out-and-out scorn – or honesty. Jesse smiled an openly mocking smile now, knowing how it would inflame her. She was spoilt and transparent, easy to manipulate. He had a lot more practice at dealing with humiliation.

'If you're hoping to make it with Sarah, be careful. Mick doesn't like poaching,' she said with an attempt at bravado.

'Mick doesn't own Sarah. Nor does he scare me. Go back to your toys.'

'Fuck off. We were just doing Sarah a favour by inviting you.'

'I'm nobody's favour, especially not yours. Now get out and don't come panting round me again. I've got better things to do with my time.'

She went white with rage. Jesse walked out of the kitchen, not bothering to shut the door behind him.

'Are you absolutely certain you don't want another steak?' Finn asked.

Jesse blushed and dropped the piece of roll with which he'd been mopping up the juices on his plate. He was still not used to having enough to eat. It wasn't as if he'd ever starved, not like the kids you saw on TV, with swollen bellies and stick limbs and eyes that had given up. In his foster homes they'd always fed him, though it had sometimes felt like hunger. The last few months had been hard – the scrounging, the hunger pangs and stomach cramps, the unrelenting dreams of food, the dread – but he'd always managed to find something to eat. A few times somebody had shared

a tin of soup or a loaf of stale bread with him, but he'd been unwilling to stick around long enough to form the kind of partnership, friendship even, that sometimes developed on the street. He knew favours had to be paid for. He wasn't sure he could return to that life.

Finn signalled to the waiter. Over Jesse's protests he ordered a second steak and the cheese board, from which he helped himself to generous wedges of some very ripe-looking specimens. The red wine was nearly finished, but he shook his head reluctantly when asked about another bottle. It was a working day.

'Don't tell Meg about the cheese,' he said with a grin. 'She's a real tyrant sometimes when it come to my diet.'

'Is anything wrong?' Jesse asked.

'With my health, you mean? Not a thing. These doctors are all mad about cholesterol.'

'But Meg's a psychiatrist.'

'A doctor's a doctor. I keep telling her that it's a load of rubbish. My ancestors have eaten cheese and butter and cream and plenty of animal fat for generations, and not one of them died before ninety.'

'None?'

'Well, there was my great-aunt Gerd, who didn't make it past seventy-three. But I think being eaten by a lion while on safari in Africa doesn't quite count as diet-related.'

'You're dubbing me,' protested Jesse.

'Not at all. Like I've said, I come from a long line of Norse adventurers. Now eat up while I tell you what I've got planned for the rest of the afternoon.'

Jesse applied himself to his steak, which the waiter had just served with a straight face and a little flourish. His eyes twinkled, though.

After a few minutes of silence, Finn emptied the wine bottle into his glass, drank, and hid his belch somewhere between a cough and a snort, followed by a sheepish grin. 'Too long in the wilderness.' The chunk of baguette remaining on his plate slowly crumbled under his fingertips.

'You're not going back, you know,' Finn said at last.

'Back?' asked Jesse. 'Back where?' He had a pretty good idea what Finn meant, however.

'Back to the street. It's no solution.'

Jesse put down his fork and knife, took a long drink of his coke; with a forefinger began to connect the dots of condensation on his glass till he caught sight of Finn's pursed lips and tapping fingers. There were few pictures concealed from Finn's eye.

'If I found a full-time job, I could afford a room somewhere.'

'Just how old are you, Jesse? Last time I asked, you hedged.'

'Nearly seventeen.'

'You belong in school.'

'I'd have to register with the authorities. I'm never going to let social services get hold of me again. Never.'

'It might not be that bad, if someone like Meg were involved. You're entitled to support and an education, you know.'

'The public library will do fine for an education. They can keep their money.'

'Easy to say when you're sixteen. Not so easy when you're thirty and still sweeping someone's yard for a fiver.'

'Better that than their mind-fucks and lockups.'

'Come off it, you're way too smart to spout that rubbish. The very worst would be shared accommodation, but there are other options. And not all social workers are incompetent. Or sadists. We're not talking concentration camp here.'

Jesse snorted. 'You've got no bloody idea.'

An expression that Jesse had not seen before crossed Finn's face. Jesse felt ashamed of himself. He had no right to talk to Finn like that. What did he really know about Finn's life? He'd lost a son, hadn't he? Jesse had no patent on suffering.

'Look, I'm sorry. It's just that I've had my fill of fostering. There are some really screwed-up people in on the game.'

'No, don't apologise. You're right. I was being officious, condescending. I can't possibly know what you've gone through. You'd think I'd have learned my lesson.' A pause. 'With Peter, Sarah's brother.'

Jesse picked at his leftover chips, now cold and unappealing, before blurting out, 'What happened to him?'

Finn raised his wineglass and tilted it against the light, studying it for so long that Jesse thought he wouldn't answer. But the answer, when it came, came all at once, like a bottle shaken, then uncorked.

'Peter was one of those bright and charismatic kids who seemed destined to sail through life without a squall – good at school, even better at sport, popular, nice-looking, girls, a talented artist. I was away a lot, took it all for granted.' A few drops of wine dripped onto the tablecloth, and Finn set the glass down. 'Expected too much from him, too, I suppose.'

It seemed impossible for Finn to have been a bad father. What could have gone wrong?

Finn blinked a few times and continued, 'I'm not sure exactly when it began to fall apart. He started staying out later and later, missing school, becoming surly and uncommunicative, sleeping for hours at a time during the day. Often not coming home at all. We kept hoping we could cope on our own. It got worse, then much worse. Meg and I – well, no marriage is that impregnable. In the end we knew we needed help. We tried to insist on counselling. There were huge bloodcurdling fights. He broke things. Stole things. One half-term when he'd just turned seventeen he left. We never saw him again.' Finn took a long draught of his wine.

Jesse spoke softly. 'How did he die?'

'I don't know if you want to hear this. You've got more in common with us than you realise.'

'I want to hear.'

'Peter was found burnt to death in a squat, along with several bodies. We don't know exactly what happened, but they were able to identify him through DNA sequencing, though not all of the others.' Finn was quiet for a moment, his pain louder than words. 'So tell me, is that what you want?'

From day to day not knowing where you'll sleep, what you'll eat, whether you'll be beaten or raped or worse by morning?'

The minutes passed as they stared at each other. Jesse dropped his eyes first.

'No,' Jesse muttered. 'No, that's not what I want.'

'What happened?' Jesse asked, crouching down to look at Nubi's leg.

Nubi was lying on a blanket in the kitchen, his rear left leg splinted and bandaged, his pelvis taped. The vet had administered a painkiller and sedative, so Nubi soon dropped his head back onto his paws. Jesse stroked his bony head, then behind his ears, and murmured 'good boy' over and over again.

'It was my fault,' Sarah said. 'I hadn't bothered with the lead, and he tore across the street just as a car was coming. We were lucky that the driver saw him and braked so fast.' She took an uneven breath, and Jesse could tell that she was still shaken by the accident. 'I never realised an animal could scream like that, Jesse. I was so scared.'

There was no point in accusing her of carelessness. She felt guilty enough as it was. Who was he to cast stones anyway? He remembered how he'd tried to drive Nubi off that first morning.

'Look, it's going to be OK, isn't it?' he said, looking up from Nubi's side. 'It's only a broken leg.'

Sarah shook her head. 'The vet said it's a nasty break, and she's not sure if it'll heal properly. The bone's in several pieces.' Her voice roughened on the last words, and she paused for a short while before continuing. 'She wants to see Nubi tomorrow, after I talk with my parents. They have to agree. Surgery's needed to put in a metal plate and screws, and it's going to be expensive.'

Jesse tightened his lips. More debts.

'Which bone is it?' he asked.

'The thigh bone,' she said. 'The vet showed me the x-rays.'

'The distal femur.'

'Yeah, that's what she called it.'

'Any other injuries?'

'No. In that way we're lucky. No ruptures, no internal bleeding, no head trauma to speak of. Just a lot of bruising, some superficial cuts.'

Jesse ran his hand lightly over Nubi's fur while he considered. He didn't like the tranquillisers, which often had an unpredictable effect on him. But it couldn't be helped. Since he'd have to wait until they were alone, with no chance of interference, some of the drugs might have worn off by then, or at least diminished in potency. And this time he'd make sure he had something sweet on hand.

Jesse rose. 'When's your dance class?'

'Maybe I'd best skip it.'

'Go. I'll stay with Nubi.'

Sarah bit a fingernail. 'Are you really OK with that?'

'Yeah. But will you do me a favour? Buy some chocolate on the way back?' He grinned. 'Lots of chocolate.'

'There's plenty left from Finn's trip.' Some of the tension left her face. 'He won't mind.'

'The ordinary stuff will do. Please.'

Sarah stopped biting her fingernails, a smile flirting with her lips. She was standing like a stork, one leg tucked up behind the other. Jesse didn't understand how she could remain so utterly still without losing her balance. He thought it must have something to do with inner calm, though she was anything but tranquil at the moment. A dancer's trick, then. He had a momentary urge to touch her, not roughly, just enough to see how well she could maintain the position. He must have made a small movement with his hand, because her eyes flitted towards it, then away again. She turned her head but not before he saw her smile widen, and a flash of pleasure – *triumph?* – ignite behind her eyes.

He remembered Mick.

'Where did you go with Mick?' he slashed, his voice like a jagged bottle. And then drawing blood. 'Too busy to look after Nubi?'

'What?'

'Mick. You do remember Mick, don't you?'

'What are you talking about?' Her raised leg thumped to the floor.

'You met Mick this afternoon, didn't you?'

'What is this with you about Mick? I told you that I'm not going out with him any longer, didn't I? Not that it's any of your business.'

'Yeah, you told me all right.'

'And just what is that supposed to mean?'

'I don't like being lied to.'

'I don't think I heard you right. Try saying that again.'

Jesse felt a flimmer of doubt but it was too late to retract his words.

'You don't need to lie to me.'

The contempt on her face hurt, impossible to pretend it didn't. His suspicion that he might have made a mistake deepened. Tondi had her own agenda, plus a good measure of cunning.

'Sarah –' he said, but she didn't give him a chance to finish. Without a word, she turned on her heel and stomped from the room. He was left with Nubi and the feeling that he needed a very long tiring swim – or a couple of aspirins. Neither of which he'd be able to get if he wanted to help Nubi.

Chapter 14

Jesse raised his head, but it took him a few moments to bring the room into focus, the place and time. He was kneeling at Nubi's side. From the doorway Meg was watching them, her face pale and shadowed in the light spilling from the hallway. He remembered now. He'd turned off the kitchen lights to make it easier to concentrate. He laid his head on Nubi's flank and breathed. He breathed.

'You're a healer, aren't you?' Meg asked.

He was unable to speak.

Meg crossed the room and crouched at his side, waiting quietly until his face had lost its mottled, watery green tinge. Then she rose again, switched on the overhead lights, and pulled out a chair for him.

'Come, you need some tea.' She gazed at him. 'Some sugar.'

'Is there any chocolate?'

'I'll fetch a box of the Swiss pralines.'

Jesse shook his head. 'Leave them. It'd be a shame, I'd eat the lot without even tasting them.'

She smiled. 'I've got a small stash of my own.' She put the kettle on to boil and left the room.

Jesse looked over at Nubi, who was dozing on his blanket. A more complicated break than the kestrel's, so he was likely to sleep for a while yet. Jesse sighed; he abhorred sedatives. Not even Matthew's medication had affected him like this. Then he grinned to himself – maybe an allergy?

While he ate and drank, Meg sat with her own thoughts till he'd recovered enough for the trembling in his muscles to cease.

'Have you done any healing?' he asked.

'My gift is different.' She paused and broke off a piece of chocolate for herself, then pushed the chocolate bar back across the table. 'There's not much left. Eat it all,' she said. 'I was going to do spaghetti for supper, but if you can't wait, I'll make you something now.'

Jesse grimaced. The thought of food made him queasy.

'No, just this. Sarah's promised to bring me some chocolate,' then added in an undertone, 'I think.'

'So she knows?'

He shook his head. 'Only that I had a craving for chocolate.'

A few coarse grains of demerara were scattered near the sugar bowl. Jesse prodded them with a fingertip. An ant would see what? Large craggy chunks of grit? A gift of the Great God Ant? An ecstatic chance? He brought his finger close and stared at the crystals clinging to his skin. He tried to imagine what it would be like not to wonder, not to have a life in his head. It was a damned lonely business, this noisy shuttered skulling. Yet without it ... He licked his finger.

'How did you know I can heal?' he asked.

'Because I can follow you in a bit.'

'You're always talking in riddles!' he said crossly.

'Would you prefer an equation? You, of all people?'

He shrugged.

'Empathy is not always a gift, you know. Sometimes it's overwhelming ... terrifying. And mostly it's just frustrating.'

'Are you warning me off?' Jesse asked with an edge to his voice. Then he ducked his head and muttered, 'Sorry.'

'Don't apologise, I've been known to throw things after some of my worst – well, Finn likes to call them *trips* to provoke me.'

'Yeah, I've been wondering whether you use any of the hallucinogens in your little black bag.'

Nonplussed, she stared at him for a moment. Then she chuckled.

'Compared to you, I'm something like an ant asked to follow Shakespeare. It can crawl between the pages. It can trace the path of the printer's ink. And it can certainly be crushed if you slam the book shut.' With the edge of her hand she swept the sugar together into her palm, a movement as sweet and cruel as a sonnet. 'But it will still find its way to the sugar from far off, won't it?' She brushed the crystals off into the sugar bowl.

Jesse felt a crawling sensation along his skin. To hide his disquiet, he broke up the rest of the chocolate and ate it piece by piece, in between sipping his tea. Psychiatrists' tricks, he tried to tell himself, but wasn't reassured.

Meg went to the back door and opened it, letting in a gust of cool air. It was still drizzling. The sky was grey and dull and featureless, hours from nightfall. The lights in the kitchen emphasised rather than dispelled the gloom.

'I'll cut some sweet peas,' Meg said. 'Their scent's best at evening. The kitchen needs cheering.'

'Would you like me to do it?' Jesse asked.

'No, it's fine. I like to get out in the garden as often as I can, among things that are growing.' She smiled. 'As you are.'

He raised a sardonic eyebrow, but she didn't seem to mind. If anything, she was amused – quietly appreciative, as though they were sharing a good joke.

'Give it time, Jesse. You'll grow into it. The mind has many rooms, and strangely painted doors, which my straighter colleagues think of as mere synapses. Some are bound to be dead ends. And others ... who knows?'

She opened a drawer and took out a pair of scissors.

'I'll be very interested to see how you develop. You might not want to hear this, but yours is the most powerful mind I've ever come across.'

'There are lots of smart people out there.'

'You know that's not what I'm talking about.'

He ran his hands through his hair, once, then a second time. When he spoke, his tone was convincingly offhand. 'Will you tell Finn?'

'About the healing?' Meg regarded him for a long moment. 'I give you my word, only if it's ever absolutely necessary.'

She took down an old, drab olive rain cape from a hook behind the door and shrugged it over her head, then kicked off her shoes. Another person who liked to walk barefoot in the rain. She picked up a basket that had seen

years of good use, laid the scissors inside, and hooked it into the crook of her arm. At the threshold she turned back to look at him.

‘Never doubt that the mind is real, Jesse.’

She closed the door with a soft click and walked out into the rain.

‘How touching,’ said Sarah from the doorway.

Seated at the table, Jesse was handing Meg flowers one by one, which she was arranging in a vase. A pot of tea steamed gently in front of him, a book lay open to his left. The kitchen was filled with the rich smell of garlic and tomato and oregano.

Sarah sauntered across the kitchen to lift the saucepan lid, releasing an even greater assault on her empty stomach so that it gave a plaintive growl, and with a wooden spoon stirred the sauce, prolonging the activity with just the right dramatic timing – not too short to go unnoticed, not too long to become absurd – then stomped over to Jesse and tossed her fistful of Cadbury bars onto the table, not caring if they broke into pieces – wanting them to break.

Nubi had raised his head when Sarah came into the kitchen. He seemed much more alert. Still without another word she went to stroke him. To her astonishment he rose to all fours and shook himself. Not only had the sedative worn off, but he was paying no more heed to his injured leg than to his leather collar. She set her chin. She’d be damned if she’d ask *him*. It would be easy enough to tackle her mother on her own afterwards.

‘How was your class?’ Meg asked.

‘Fine.’

‘Was Thomas there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘We’ll be eating in fifteen minutes.’

‘Not hungry.’

Meg dealt with schizophrenia and severe depression and bipolar disorder and autism on a daily basis. A little temper tantrum didn’t even register on her radar screen.

‘No problem.’ Meg turned to Jesse. ‘Would you mind fetching Finn up from the office?’ She was careful not to look at the intercom.

But Sarah also knew a thing or two about mothers. ‘I’ll do it. I’m going anyway.’

She turned on her heel and left, closing the door behind her. Not slamming it, just letting it make a nice loud statement.

Jesse thought he’d have a look at the games on the laptop before going to check on Nubi. He loaded the chess program and played a few games. Despite his fatigue, he trawled easily through the advanced level but left grandmaster for another time. No matter how much he ridiculed himself, he remained stubbornly loathe to lose to a machine. He had a rapid look at the other games, all pretty much standard fare. He’d have a go at them eventually – he enjoyed a good cop chase as much as the next bloke, so long as it stayed virtual. Smart people didn’t tangle with the police, ever.

Idly he doubleclicked on a last game, then frowned. The screen had gone blank.

Or so it seemed. Reckoning the whole thing was a typical freeze, Jesse was about to soft boot when the screen became a uniform dark purple. His hand hovered over the keyboard. He was curious, but he also wanted to have another look at Nubi – the femur had been in bad condition. Though Nubi could put his weight on the leg now, the healing process would be slow, and Jesse knew he'd have to go back in. It would be foolhardy, of course, to make another attempt so soon. He leaned his elbows on the desk and massaged the knots at the base of his skull. That deathly cold – he shivered, then straightened abruptly. It wasn't memory that frosted his computer screen, that exhaled a puff of white vapour. He was suddenly afraid.

Present fears are less than horrible imaginings. The words floated in large shimmering 3-D letters across the display, then disappeared, leaving the screen empty once more. Jesse stared at it in disbelief. Macbeth's words: had he imagined them? Could he be that tired? Or ...? Jesse ran a fingertip across the screen. Cold, icy cold. Even his imagination couldn't possibly produce the thin scraping of frost rapidly melting on his skin. He shivered again and fetched a jumper from the wardrobe. His curiosity was stronger than his fear now. He might not be able to control what was happening to the temperature, but a computer had never yet intimidated him, nor awed him either.

First he tried the mouse, then the keyboard. No response. The screen remained purple, although the colour shimmered into blue at the edges. The oddest system crash he'd ever seen. He could reboot and try again. But if he wanted to fiddle around properly, he would need some time, probably a lot of time. Jesse drummed his fingers lightly on the wooden desktop. He knew himself. Once he began, he might not resurface for hours. Nubi needed attention – and then there was Sarah. He hoped that she'd calmed down enough to talk to him.

A movement on the screen caught Jesse's attention. Impossible. The computer had locked down. Chin on his knitted hands, he fixed his eyes on the display, as if by fierce concentration alone he could will the computer to yield up its secrets. He didn't dare touch the keyboard for fear of interrupting what was unfolding before him.

A small sphere had formed in the exact centre of the screen. To begin with it looked like a child's blue ball, but under Jesse's scrutiny, land and ocean and clouds appeared, not all at once but slowly, rising from the depths of the display much like one of Finn's images in the darkroom. It wasn't the earth. The shape of the continent on the visible hemisphere was wrong. As the object – planet, he assumed – began to revolve, the continent proved to be the sole landmass. Soon the planet was rotating, then spinning, then whirling so fast that Jesse could no longer make out any details on its surface. Uneasily he noticed that it now looked exactly like Peter's top. One hand stole into his pocket, where he'd been keeping the toy. It felt warm under his fingers and was vibrating slightly. In his palm it seemed the same as usual, except that his skin was tingling by contact with the wood. Jesse glanced back at the laptop screen. Startled, he dropped the top, which bounced off the desk and fell with a thunk to the floor.

It was very hard for him to believe what he'd just witnessed: cradled by a hand, the blue top on the screen had nova'd in a burst of brilliant bluewhite light.

Now the screen was black, and blank. Like the interior of a camera obscura after sunset, or Finn's darkroom. The room was warm again, and Jesse's shivering had another source.

Just before Jesse fell asleep that night, he remembered that the continent he'd seen on the display wasn't unfamiliar to him. Rendered by geographers and later by computer modelling, it had been named Pangaea.

Chapter 15

‘Ready for your first lesson?’ Finn asked.

‘Lesson?’ Jesse looked puzzled for a moment, then grinned. ‘It’s not too wet, is it?’

‘Just a shower. A bit trickier, but you’ll be fine. The thing is, over the next few weeks I’m going to be away a lot, off and on, so I thought we ought use whatever time we can find.’

Jesse glanced down at his jeans, his shoes. ‘I haven’t got any rain gear.’

‘Come down to my office.’

Sarah had been joking only about the chains. The black leather outfit fitted almost perfectly, as if Finn had measured him in his sleep.

‘I feel –’ Jesse stopped, searching for an adequate description. ‘I feel like a sleek black panther.’

‘Feels good though, doesn’t it?’

‘Better than I thought it would. Much better.’

Finn regarded Jesse’s feet sceptically before passing him a pair of boots.

‘Try these on. They’re the only spares I’ve got, but it doesn’t look as if they’ll fit.’

Jesse unlaced one of his trainers. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t manage to screw his foot inside. He was reminded of Cinderella’s ugly stepsisters.

Finn must have been thinking the same thing.

‘Just as I guessed. Forget the glass slipper. We’ll have to get you some proper manly boots.’

‘I’ve got big feet,’ said Jesse, wriggling his toes in relief.

‘Immaterial. They only start charging extra when your feet approach yeti measurements.’

Jesse was quiet for a moment.

‘Did you buy all this stuff for me?’

Finn shuffled some papers on his desk, his face suddenly inscrutable.

Finn’s money made Jesse uncomfortable. Not because Finn had it. Not because Jesse didn’t like accepting it (though he didn’t). But because Jesse noticed that he minded accepting it less and less.

‘They belonged to Peter?’ Jesse asked, realisation dawning.

‘Yes.’

They looked at each other, then Finn patted Jesse awkwardly on the shoulder.

‘Go on, get ready,’ Finn said. ‘Take the blue helmet by the front door and leave the black-and-silver one for me. I’ll meet you at the garage. I need to make a phone call before we start.’

‘Where are we going? I’m not old enough to drive, you know.’

Finn didn’t succeed in hiding his smile. ‘You’ll see,’ was all he’d say.

Jeans in hand, Jesse headed for the stairs, then remembered that he'd taken his cigarettes from his pocket while changing and left them on Finn's desk.

'Sorry, I forgot my –' Jesse began, as he opened the office door.

Finn was holding a pistol in his hand. Their eyes locked, then Finn sighed and gestured for Jesse to enter.

'Please shut the door,' Finn said.

He stowed the gun in a desk drawer before explaining.

'I wish you hadn't seen that, but it can't be helped now.' He tugged at his beard. 'I suppose you're wondering what I'm doing with a firearm.'

'Yeah, you could say that.'

'I need it for my work.'

'As a *photographer*?' With some difficulty Jesse refrained from a nasty crack about photo shoots.

'Some of the places I go are dangerous.' Finn chewed his lower lip for a moment, his eyes on Jesse. 'OK, it's obvious you're not convinced. Let's just say that photography isn't my only work.'

'You mean –'

'I mean,' Finn interrupted, 'that I can't and won't talk about it. For a lot of reasons. And I'm relying on you to do the same.'

Jesse ran swiftly upstairs, two at a time. Outside his room he came face to face with Sarah, who was carrying the satchel she used for dance classes. She averted her gaze and walked on past him, then spun round, her eyes chasing the colour of thunder, her voice accusing.

'Did my father give you those biking clothes?'

He nodded.

Sarah tightened her lips and strode off. Peter's Harley gear was the one thing Finn had refused to pack up or give away. Now Jesse was prancing around in it. Well, not prancing ... he didn't prance. Not like some, who flaunted themselves at every opportunity. Jesse danced without taking a single step. The black leather was soft and supple – and just a little savage. Sarah ignored the thistle unfurling in her belly, but not the words her treacherous mind was whispering. Damn him. He had no right to look so good. So perfect. So *sexy*. She could just imagine what someone like Tondi would say – or do.

Jesse watched her leave.

In his room he tossed his jeans onto the bed and rubbed his hands along the sensuous leather of the trousers, whose warmth reminded him of melting chocolate, or Emmy's fresh-bathed skin. He'd never clad himself in – and certainly never owned – anything of this calibre. Wearing Peter's garments didn't make him feel a trespasser, no matter how much Sarah resented it.

Unable to find the elastic for his hair on the bedside table, Jesse went to check his desk. As he shifted the pad of paper he was using for some notes, he caught a whiff of anise and turned to look if he'd left the window open. This time the lad is lying on a rough cement floor, one eye swollen shut, his

face a mass of bruises, blood trickling from his mouth. Help me, he says. You're the only one who can.

Jesse gasps and takes a step forward.

'Jesse!' Finn's voice bellowed from the downstairs hallway. 'What's taking you so long?'

The Harley was a monster. A dream machine whose power lay not in cc (1450, and no anti-gravity required for lift-off) nor its size nor its in-your-face design, but in its mystique. Even Jesse felt it as Finn showed him how to check out the simple stuff – the T-CLOCK inspection, he called it (tyres, controls, lights, oil, chassis, and kickstand).

'Always look your bike over carefully before even *thinking* about starting off. You can avoid big problems, save yourself a lot of grief that way.' He grinned. 'Maybe your life.' Then he gave Jesse a spare key and told him to zip it into a pocket. 'I duct tape it to a hiding place on the bike when I haven't got someone riding pillion.'

He ran through a number of other instructions and safety tips, showed Jesse the controls, explained a few basics about engine, clutch, brakes, gears. He was a good teacher, patient and thorough and explicit. Then he verified that Jesse's helmet was securely fastened, wheeled the bike out of the garage, mounted, waited for Jesse to hop on behind, started the engine, revved it once – hard – for the sheer *wicked* pleasure of it, saluted the sky with a gloved fist, and they were away.

The rain was light, the tarmac slick and shiny. Their wheels threw up a fine spray which billowed behind them as the Harley sliced through the outskirts of the city, opening a rite of passage into the hills. Surprised that his visor didn't fog, Jesse found it difficult to gauge how fast they drove. He was warm, though. Moisture simply beaded on Peter's leathers, which must have been waxed or treated in some way.

Questions buzzed about in Jesse's head, but he could do little more than hang on tight to Finn's waist and wait for them to reach their destination. Jesse hadn't been sure how he would cope with riding body to body, entirely dependent on someone else's skill. Perhaps it was their protective clothing, but Jesse experienced no discomfort whatsoever – no uneasiness, no shrinking away. At one point, as Finn strafed sharply into the next corner, Jesse tightened his hold and leaned into the big man's shoulder. Finn shouted something unintelligible back at him, then slowed a bit, took a hand off the handlebar, and gripped Jesse's where it lay across his own generous midriff. Jesse straightened with a smile, an indecent sense of gratitude filling his throat for a few moments.

After about thirty minutes, they passed a dip in the road, then a cluster of derelict stone buildings, where they turned off into a narrow lane. They were well above the river now – once or twice Jesse had glimpsed its long sinuous curve and the spread of the city, appearing from this distance to cling like a malignant lesion to both sides of a dark blue vein. Even the Old Bridge had been visible. Finn couldn't maintain his previous speed, for the lane was overgrown and muddy. The rain had just about let up, and above the trees Jesse could see patches of lighter sky behind swiftly driving

gunmetal cloud, though no blue as yet. There were puddles in the lane, some deep enough to reach the axles, but Finn was able to dodge the worst potholes. He maintained an even and alert pace, never once skidding or losing traction.

A five-bar gate barricaded the end of the lane. *Private*, the sign said. *No Entry*. Finn pulled to a halt and signalled for Jesse to open it. The lane became a grassy track just wide enough for a vehicle. From the ruts and flattened nettles Jesse could tell that a car had passed through here recently. He slid off a little unsteadily, surprised to see the treetops whipping in the breeze. Once Finn had steered the motorbike across the cattlegrid – though no herd was in evidence – Jesse closed the gate and climbed back on board. Finn followed the track as it skirted a ridge and twisted to the right, then entered a dense wooded tract. After about three kilometres, the track forked, then began to steepen uphill. They needed another twenty minutes to reach a small clearing. An ancient Landrover was parked outside a stone cottage. When Jesse dismounted and removed his helmet, he saw that the track ended here.

‘Go and have a look,’ Finn told him, waving towards the rear of the cottage.

Jesse examined the dwelling, which had been built either by a genius or a madman – or was a joint venture. Two-thirds of the walls were natural stone, more pinkish in colour than common in the area and intensifying in places to a deep salmon; the remainder, cement painted a bright sapphire blue. No two windows were of the same size or shape, and all were asymmetrical. And although Jesse counted the outer walls repeatedly, he came up with a different number each time. There were no 90° angles to be found anywhere, and quite a few bulges and curves. The roof surged and recoiled around an off-centre chimney. And Jesse swore that he saw the fender of a steam engine mortared under one of the eaves.

It was magnificent.

Jesse laid his helmet on the motorcycle seat, shook the stiffness out of his shoulders, and walked slowly around the cottage, skirting a large mound of straw bales. He stopped when he reached the back, and gaped.

The entire rear wall of the cottage was an amber-tinted mirrored façade, affording privacy but providing a breathtaking view. The cottage was built into the bank of a large, stream-fed pond – a small upland lake, really. A wooden deck jutted far out over the water, so that its broad teak planks appeared to be floating free like a raft, and on the opposite shore a waterfall plummeted first into a rocky plunge pool, then spilled into the clear depths of the lake itself. Immediately Jesse yearned to strip and throw himself into the water, swim across to the falls. This was something he understood!

Then he realised that they weren’t alone. Under a large garden parasol a man was stretched out in a deckchair, with a tartan woollen rug tucked round him. He threw off the blanket and rose as Jesse walked towards him, held out his arm, and smiled broadly. A long-sleeved jumper hid his tattoos; one sleeve had been truncated and sewn shut.

‘Welcome, Jesse,’ Matthew said.

Finn was approaching from around the other side of the cottage, a big grin on his face.

Inside they sat down to strong black tea. There was a large tin of homemade shortbread, too, and a fire that Matthew lit in the stone fireplace.

'Whose place is this?' Jesse asked, after he'd eaten a frightening number of biscuits and had a chance to look round him. The interior was as fascinating as he'd expected, but scantily furnished. They were seated on very simple armchairs and a sofa – straight clean lines, quiet colours. It was the architecture itself that decorated the room.

'Mine,' said Matthew. 'The land belongs to my family, but I built the cottage myself.'

'Stone by stone,' said Finn, 'when Matthew was stronger.' He looked at Matthew with a question in his eyes.

'He knows,' Matthew said. 'We can talk about it.'

'You're looking better. Much better than last time I saw you,' Finn said.

Matthew and Jesse exchanged glances. Jesse gave an almost imperceptible shake to his head, then turned to study the trees and rocky outcroppings through the great stretch of glass. The surface of the lake reflected the sombre tones of the sky and the rain-darkened trees, except where the waterfall foamed into its lap.

'I *am* feeling better,' Matthew said.

'A new course of treatment?'

'Yes.' Matthew let it go at that.

'Excellent.' Finn addressed Jesse. 'I thought you'd enjoy this place.'

Matthew indicated his missing arm. 'Finn helped me build the cottage. That's why he gets squatter's rights.'

Jesse must have looked confused, since Finn laughed and explained. 'I use the cottage as kind of retreat, when I need to do some quiet thinking. I get fed up sometimes with the noise and the stink and the crowds. The carnivorous city. And the *telephone*. Whoever invented the mobile should be butchered in his own laboratory, or at least made to listen to that infernal ringing day and night, till he goes mad from sleep deprivation.'

'Use your mailbox,' Matthew said.

Finn smote his head. 'Now *why* didn't I think of that?'

Jesse was picturing Finn's spacious house, his complex of rooms in the basement, and the quiet overgrown garden.

'I can tell what you're thinking, Jesse. What have I got to complain about?'

Jesse grinned. 'Yeah, something like that.'

'Don't forget that I grew up with the northern wilderness for my backyard. It's in my blood, which gets too thin on a steady diet of exhaust fumes and neon lights.'

'One of the reasons you like to take those long exotic assignments?' Jesse asked, an ironic overtone creeping into his voice.

Finn pulled his pipe, lighter, and tobacco pouch from a pocket. He spent some time filling the bowl, then clamped the stem between his teeth without lighting up. 'One of them.'

'Finn does a fair amount of shooting up here,' Matthew said. 'Photos, not wildlife.'

Finn removed the pipe from his mouth.

'The abstracts in the sitting room were photographed near the waterfall,' he said. 'There's a lot that can be done just within a three-kilometre radius of the cottage.'

'You didn't bring a camera,' Matthew said.

'Not today. This trip is for Jesse.' He glanced out the window. 'I'm introducing him to biking. If it doesn't start to rain again, I'd like to let him have a go on his own.' He turned to Jesse. 'There are kilometres of private road throughout the woodland. It's a very extensive property.'

'My uncle's been having the track near the ancient quarry cleared and widened. There's a good-sized flattish bit where Jesse could practice,' Matthew said.

'Good idea,' Finn said.

'Are you going to light that thing?' Matthew asked, pointing at the pipe. 'If so, I'll fetch an ashtray.'

'Maybe later.' Finn poured himself another cup of tea from the pot. 'Driving back tonight?'

'Tomorrow morning. Or did you want some privacy?'

'You don't live here all the time?' Jesse asked.

Matthew shook his head.

'Matthew often stays in the city, at his uncle's boathouse, when he's not –' Finn looked down into his mug.

'When I'm not in hospital.'

They were silent for a few minutes, listening to the low crackling of the fire.

'Mind if I smoke?' Jesse asked when the smell of the burning wood became insistent, and uncomfortable.

'Only in so far as I know what cancer's like,' Matthew said. 'There are faster – and less painful – ways to kill yourself. Pills, for one. Or jumping off the Old Bridge, which would be a touch more melodramatic. And add to the legends whispered about the bridge.'

'Don't be so bloody morbid, Matthew,' Finn said.

'Morbid? *Me*? Because I've got my pills hoarded? I call it being a good boy scout. Suicide is a perfectly legitimate option ... sometimes.'

Jesse hesitated. He'd forgotten how blunt Matthew could be. But Matthew picked up Finn's lighter and tossed it across to Jesse.

'Go on, then,' he said. 'If you must.'

But Jesse left his cigarettes in his pocket. He was not stopped by the prospect of cancer in some far distant future. Nor was he intimidated by Matthew. It was the flash of grief that he'd seen in Matthew's eyes, perhaps not for himself, but for all the stupid and senseless and destructive things people do to themselves with the little time they're given.

And Finn in those few minutes of shared silence had watched Peter sawing planks of wood for Matthew, loping off with his sketchbook towards the lake, throwing a stick to a golden-coated dog.

'Where's Daisy?' Finn asked.

'Out chasing lemmings,' Matthew said.

'Forgot to buy dog food again, have you?' Finn asked.

They laughed, and Jesse helped himself to another biscuit.

‘Those are Peter’s things, aren’t they?’ Matthew asked. ‘It’s about time they were used.’ Mortality was a fact of life for him, not a nasty little secret to be kept hidden in a cupboard.

Jesse managed not to overturn the motorcycle, and he only stalled the engine twice. Finn had him practice starting till he could do it smoothly; the first few times he forgot about the kill switch, then tried to start the engine while in gear. He had some trouble coordinating clutch and throttle. Eventually he was able to drive in a wide circle without wobbling, though he still didn’t trust himself entirely with the gear shifter. Leaning to make a turn and braking seemed to come naturally to him, but smooth throttle operations were less successful.

Jesse removed his helmet and flicked back his hair. There was a line of sweat along his brow. He’d forgotten what it was like for someone to believe in you.

‘That’s enough for now,’ Finn said. ‘It’s a big bike, and it would have been easier to start out on a scooter or at least a lighter machine. We’ll work on changing gears, then swerving and emergency braking the next couple of times I take you out, before you try to get up any speed.’

Jesse mopped his face with his hand.

‘You did fine, Jesse. Remind me someday to tell you about my first afternoon on a motorbike.’

‘What happened?’

‘Not now. I have to be very drunk to recount the story. Hop on, and we’ll go back to the cottage.’

‘Do you mind if I make my own way back? I’d like to walk through the wood, maybe go down to the lake.’

Finn glanced at his watch. ‘I can’t be away for too long. How about if I run you down to a path that leads to the waterfall, and you walk back along the lake by yourself? Will that do for today?’

Jesse nodded.

‘Good,’ said Finn. ‘There are some things I need to go over with Matthew.’

‘He’s a very unusual man.’

‘How much has he told you about himself?’

‘Very little. We don’t talk much while we work.’

‘That’s like him. He’s as open as can be about his illness, but there’s a lot he leaves out. He was studying architecture when they discovered his cancer. It changed everything for him. His father was devastated. Matthew’s an only child, and his mother died when he was eleven. Of a brain tumour,’ Finn said.

‘Shit.’

‘There’s more. Aside from the arm, I mean. He was living with a woman. It had been a few years, they’d talked about getting married, kids were being mentioned. Within six weeks of the diagnosis, she was gone. Packed her clothes and her books and her cat and moved in with someone else. She couldn’t deal with illness, not serious illness. *Fatal* illness. In a way I could understand her. When I didn’t feel like throttling her.’ He gave a small flat

laugh. 'Her name was Daisy. To this day I can't figure out whether it was longing or bitterness that made Matthew name his dog after her.'

'Or masochism.'

'Know something about that, do you?'

There was an uncomfortable silence. After a moment Jesse turned and looked towards the open face of the quarry. Not once had he thought to ask Matthew about his life. It would be easy for Jesse to pretend that it was out of delicacy, but he'd be fooling himself. He'd been too preoccupied with his own thoughts, his own issues. He swallowed, his mouth tasted sour. He thought of Mal, who had needed those model ships; the glass bottles had contained a message for Jesse that he'd refused to decrypt.

'But Matthew adopted Daisy – most people underestimate a husky's needs, and she'd been turned over to the RSPCA – and started work on the narrowboat. He's got a little family money and probably not a whole lot of time, but he's one of the sanest men I know. Dying teaches you how to live, he always says.' Finn paused for a moment, examining Jesse's profile, then braved, 'If I were trapped in a burning building, there's no one I'd rather have trying to reach me, one arm and all.'

Without a word Jesse strapped on his helmet and went to stand by the Harley until Finn joined him.

It was a struggle not to go for a swim – a struggle which Jesse quickly lost. Ten minutes, he told himself, no more. He looked round, but of course there was no one in sight. He stripped, debating whether to leave anything on, then decided for once against it. He didn't mind if a trout or badger caught a glimpse of him.

He'd picked a spot where he wouldn't have to fight his way through a thicket of reeds or clamber over rocky ground to reach the water's edge. Tossing back his hair, he stepped quickly through the coarse grass at the bank, scanned for underwater hazards, and pushed off from the gently sloping shelf. The lake was cold, but no colder than he was used to.

Jesse struck out for the centre of the lake. He'd have to leave the waterfall for another time. If he swam the circumference of the lake, he could probably locate the outlet, unless it were far underwater. The lake must flow into the river, eventually into the sea. As his arms parted the water with his unhurried stroke, strong and true as an elegant theorem, he pictured the cells his body was right now giving up to the water – a little skin, some sweat, a hair or two, his spit, his pee – and which would in time arrive at the coast. How strange that he might encounter part of himself there, when he finally reached it. And part of how many others, too? He'd never thought of it that way before. What had Sarah said? Some places carry an imprint. Who knew what complex codes were still to be deciphered in the most ordinary stuff?

He rolled over onto his back. Idly he flicked the water with his fingers. What am I doing here? he asked himself. What are any of us? A few raindrops sprinkled his face, scribbled on the surface of the lake. He laughed: getting wet. The universe's answer to our frantic scrabble for meaning. He wished Sarah were here to share the joke with him. Then he

remembered her scorn – her hurt. He flipped over and slid beneath the surface of the water. Apologise, you fool. The resounding silence of the lake offered no rebuke – but no absolution either.

On the bank Jesse rubbed his hands along his limbs to warm and dry them. He squeezed out the excess water from his hair, combed it back with his fingers. He'd pulled on his pants, though his skin was still a little damp, and was reaching for his T-shirt when he heard a soft footfall behind him. Quickly he turned to hide his back from view.

'Cold?' Finn asked.

'Not too bad.'

Neither spoke for a moment.

'I reckon you've seen them,' Jesse said. 'The scars on my back.'

'From the fire?'

Jesse nodded.

And that was that.

Finn picked up a stone and skipped it neatly across the surface of the lake. Quickly Jesse donned his clothing, leaving the leather jacket unzipped. He checked for the top, then searched the ground. At the water's edge he found a handful of smooth pebbles.

'Challenge?' he asked.

Finn broke into a wide grin. 'Loser gets to climb up on the roof.'

'Even as a forfeit that's rather extreme.'

'I'm serious, there's a broken tile to replace before we leave. I don't want Matthew doing it on his own. That's why I came to fetch you. One of us needs to hold the ladder.' He hiked his leather trousers, then rubbed his hands together gleefully. 'I hope you're not afraid of heights. Years ago I was Olympic gold medallist in ducks and drakes.' He looked up at the clouds. 'Come on, it looks as if the sky has got a bellyache.'

'Prepare for your ignominious defeat,' Jesse said. He divided up the stones and let Finn choose the pile he preferred.

'You won't beat me next time,' Jesse said.

'Is that so? Then perhaps a little timely practice might be in order,' Finn said.

They smiled amicably at each other as they went to fetch the ladder.

'Matthew! What are you doing up there?'

Matthew jerked at the sound of Finn's voice, and the ladder on which he was standing wobbled. Then, in excruciating slow motion, exactly as in a film, it began to tilt. There's one single instant when it seems the fall could be prevented. Loki peers at the board, cradles the dice – he loves to play Snakes and Ladders. And what better chance? Matthew, suspended in mid-air, carried by the sudden breathless silence, the silent breath of wind. Jesse sees the tiny figure clinging with one arm to the Lego ladder. Hovering far above, he sees the toy dog, the bearded man with wide staring eyes and a round O of a mouth, and the blond boy. His merciless vision tells him that even with his speed he cannot reach the man soon enough to pluck him

safely from the ladder – from the game. All he can do is adjust, fractionally, the trajectory. And so he flaps his wings, once, and tugs at the air, rises in a fierce steep climb, and is gone.

Matthew landed unharmed in the bales of straw. Once he'd recovered his breath, he stared at Jesse. 'Just before I fell, I saw you enter the kestrel,' he whispered.

Jesse closed his book and stretched. Time for a jog in the park, maybe along the river. As soon as Nubi could run properly, they'd go after dark; even better, after midnight. Jesse missed the deep solitude of night, its timelessness; its spatial singularity.

There was a faint but enticing smell seeping under the door. Could Meg be home already? She'd said that she was taking on extra duty in order to have a few days off next week to clear out the attic. A daunting task. He'd stay that long, certainly.

There was still the road, and the sea.

Jesse glanced at Nubi, who was stretched out theatrically with his broken leg on display, and snorted. Another performer. The bandage was past its *best by* date: grubby and starting to unravel. Nubi wouldn't leave off tearing at it with his teeth. Finn was taking them by car to the vet day after tomorrow.

There was still the sea.

Nubi would be a good travelling companion. It wouldn't always be easy to feed him, but people trusted you more readily with a dog – or left you alone.

There was still the sea.

Jesse rubbed a hand across his eyes. Matthew's face had begun to flesh out already, and to lose its telltale translucence, if not the deep lines of pain. And he was paying Jesse more than he should. It was time to look for a second job, a room (though Finn would be hurt). At least until the primary tumour deep inside Matthew's head had shrunk.

There was still the sea.

He'd promised himself to swim the lake. Just as Sarah had promised to tell him what Peter had been like. Promises ...

And there was still the sea.

Someone knocked, a quiet and tentative sound.

'Come in,' Jesse called out.

Sarah opened the door, a plate in her hands.

'I've baked some brownies,' she said with a hesitant smile. 'Want to try them?'

She was dressed in her usual jeans and T-shirt, but she looked different somehow – softer, more troubled. There were dark rings under her eyes, and her freckles stood out. She had very long feathery eyelashes, he noticed. Like Nubi's. He grinned to himself at the comparison. But Nubi had very pretty eyes.

'What is it?' she asked, seeing his lips twitch.

'I was just thinking about your eyes,' Jesse answered. Immediately he wanted to thwack himself on the forehead. What a *stupid* thing to say.

Sarah didn't seem to find it so bad. She coloured some, but her smile became less hesitant, and she prodded his chest with the plate. 'Come on, try one. They're good.'

'Mm,' he said, chewing slowly and luxuriously, his mouth having decided it had arrived at the garden of Eden. Apple? Adam hadn't had a clue.

'What did you call them?' Jesse asked.

'Brownies,' Sarah repeated. 'They're American.'

'No,' he said as he reached for another, 'they're Divine.'

They settled on Jesse's bed, eating without saying much. Very soon the brownies were finished. Jesse picked up the last crumbs from the plate with a fingertip. He sighed and lay back with his arms under his head, his eyelids heavy. Just now he would tell her he was sorry. And maybe he'd wait until later to go out. He was full and warm and a bit sleepy. He could feel his mind slip its moorings, adrift on the wavelets lapping against their old dock. A gentle breeze ruffled his hair. Thistle-light it brushed his skin. He opened his eyes just as Sarah touched her lips to his. Her long hair swung across his face like a fresh gust of wind.

Her eyes were wide, liquid. With one arm Jesse reached up and buried his hand in her hair, pulled her into the kiss. The scent of chocolate lingered on her breath. He felt his body stirring. Her small breasts nestled against his chest. He tightened his hand in her hair. She shifted against him, and a line of heat raced from his mouth to his groin. Her heart drumming. A sound like tearing silk in his throat. Could she feel his erection, how did you tell with a girl, if he touched her, would it be springy like Liam's or more like fine new grass, soft and full and lush they must be to call them lips, warm too, moist there where she'd let Mick ... his mind buckled like a metal girder being torn from its rivets.

'No,' he cried. 'No.'

Jesse pushed her away and sat up. His face was blotched, his breathing uneven.

Sarah rolled onto her side, her face hidden from him. Neither of them said a word. Jesse became aware that her shoulders were trembling. He waited till he could lever himself upright, sat for a moment with his hands between his knees, then rose and went to the window. He gripped the sill, looking out. A few smudges of blue were leaking into the clouds. Briefly a finger of sunlight poked its way through the canvas, gilding everything it touched before being swallowed up again by greyness. He leaned his head against the windowpane, the glass cool on his forehead.

Only when Jesse heard the door shut softly did he realise Sarah had left the room.

Chapter 16

Pleased by Nubi's quick recuperation, the vet removed the splint.

'What a clever lad. He's broken all the rules,' she said, scratching Nubi behind his ears and feeding him a handful of treats. 'If it weren't patently impossible, I'd swear he's grown younger as well.'

Finn was about to joke about Jesse's magic touch when he got a glimpse of Jesse's face.

'Let's not bother cooking just for the two of us,' Finn said as they left the surgery. Sarah had another evening class and Meg was on duty at the hospital. 'There's a place near the boatyards I think you'll like. We'll see if Matthew's around. He can join us.'

'What about Nubi? He's not allowed in a restaurant, is he?'

'Don't worry about it.'

'Hairy Spider's place?' Matthew asked when they removed the scraper forcibly from his hand. 'OK, why not? I suppose my ears can take it for once.' He went to clean himself up.

'Hairy Spider?' Jesse asked.

'That's just our nickname for Siggy. The owner.' Finn grinned but refused to elaborate.

Matthew left Daisy in the boathouse. 'She's used to it. Terrific deterrent. Nobody likes to tangle with a wolf. They've got no idea that she's really a marshmallow, do they, sweetheart?' he said, addressing the last to Daisy.

Finn was regarding Matthew with a strange glimmer in his eyes. 'You're looking even stronger than last time. You've put on some weight. That new treatment is working wonders.'

'Yeah, well, it's still early to speak of remission. But I'm hungry all the time. Mind you, I'm not complaining.'

'I should hope not,' Finn said, and left it at that. But Jesse noticed that Finn kept stealing sidelong glances at Matthew as they headed past the commercial boatyard into a warren of small shops and cobbled lanes crowded with street vendors.

Jesse could hear live music reeling them in like a good fisherman, slow and steady, as they turned into a sunny courtyard. Both Jesse and Nubi stopped in astonishment, Nubi's nose quivering, Jesse's flaring with equal delight. Every centimetre, every *millimetre* of ground except for a narrow paved walkway was covered with herbs, some that Jesse recognised and many that he didn't. Scents dense enough to taste – to spread onto a piece of fresh bread. Slow hypnotic riffs swelled over them – a saxophone was playing hoarsely, achingly. The fine hairs on Jesse's neck stirred.

The music died away as they approached the door. The restaurant was large and clean and plain, with white plastered walls, a flagged floor, and only a few well-chosen photos of music instruments – not musicians – for decoration. It looked as if they might be Finn's work, for Jesse could hear the

luminous black-and-white instruments begin to sing as soon as his eyes lit on them.

They took possession of a table near the front, where a drum kit and some music stands were set up. A bass waited on its side, a clarinet and trumpet on a chair, and a tenor sax in a stand, but there was no sign of the musicians. After a few minutes, a huge barrel of a man walked out of the kitchen carrying a tray – Siggy, Jesse guessed straightaway. He had a dark tangled beard shot with grey, eyebrows like black loafahs, and a head of kinky hair that charged below his shoulders, tied back with what seemed to be a pipe-cleaner. When he spied Finn and Matthew, he shoved the tray at a young waiter, barked ‘the three po-faced gits near the bar,’ and came rushing over to them, laughing raucously and shouting hello. Jesse understood why they called him a spider: his arms and legs freewheeled wildly as he moved, so that it looked as if he had eight limbs – or even twelve – instead of the usual contingent.

‘You’re going to lose customers if you keep on insulting them, Siggy,’ Finn said by way of greeting.

‘That’s why I’m the businessman an’ you’re the bleedin’ artist,’ bellowed Siggy in return. ‘You don’t understand a thing about runnin’ a good chop-house. The more you kick ’em in the cahones, the quicker they come back. Specially when I feed ’em so good.’ He raised his eyebrows at Nubi, then at Jesse, who stared at them in fascination. They had a life of their own.

‘Siggy, this is Jesse, who’s staying with us for a while, and his dog Nubi,’ Finn said.

‘Nubi, eh? Like that Egyptian bloke who carted away the dead?’ He chuckled when he saw a look of surprise cross Jesse’s face. ‘Big an’ fat an’ hairy I might be, but not dumb. No ways. An’ don’t you forget it.’

Jesse, red-faced, muttered an apology but Siggy only laughed and waved a hand.

Jesse got his second surprise when Siggy told them what to eat. ‘The crab bouillabaisse to start, then the Japanese beef. A special order. Nobody else in the whole country’s got any. Sweet and smooth like your mama’s milk. An’ I’ll chose the wine.’ He grinned at Jesse. ‘Sorry, lad, but I follow the rules. At least most of ’em,’ he said, gesturing at Nubi. ‘But I got a great fresh mango juice for you. At Siggy’s you eat what Siggy tells you.’

‘Any bread?’ asked Matthew.

‘Oh man, have I got bread. Just you wait.’ Then he squinted at Matthew. ‘Two pounds? Nope, three. What they do to you? You’re gainin’ weight.’

‘Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better. What’s for dessert?’

‘For the two of you, the best berry tarts this side of heaven. With crème chantilly. And for Jesse here –’ He paused to reflect. ‘I can see he’s a chocolate man. My own double fudge ice cream, with extra chunks.’

A moan escaped from Jesse’s lips. Siggy laughed again. ‘OK, an extra-large helpin’. I like a man who likes to eat.’

A girl with an alto sax and a skinny kid of maybe eighteen or nineteen rose from a corner table and made their way to the front. Siggy cracked his knuckles and spoke to Finn.

‘You playin’?’

Finn shook his head. 'Not today.' He hefted his camera. 'A few photos, if I may.'

'Hey, Donna, OK with you if Finn here takes a couple of shots?' Siggy called out. When she signalled her agreement, he added, 'But you be careful now, he might make you famous.'

'Can Nubi stay here?' Jesse asked.

'I got a mess of soup bones an' kidneys just for him,' Siggy answered. He crouched and eyeballed Nubi, man to man. 'But you got to be quiet an' stay in my office, you hear now?' Rising, Siggy laid his big hand on Jesse's shoulder for a moment and squeezed. He had powerful fingers. Jesse picked up the paper napkin and began to tear it into strips.

Siggy addressed him shrewdly. 'I'll look after him, lad.'

Lips moving in and out, in and out, Siggy combed his beard with his fingers and continued to regard Jesse. The silence at their table seemed to swallow the sounds from the entire room.

Finally Siggy roused himself. 'Jesse, you need sweetnin'. You got the deepest eyes I seen since the islands. An' that only ever once.' He turned to Finn. 'You look after this boy good. Might be he's goin' to do us a few things.'

With a sideways motion of his head Siggy beckoned Nubi, who sprang up and padded after the big man through the swing doors into the kitchen.

Jesse and Matthew listened to the music while Finn photographed. It wasn't a memorable performance, and Jesse watched Finn more than the musicians. He thought that the girl on alto sax played well enough, though not with the haunting quality they'd heard before. Then Siggy brought the food, and Jesse stopped noticing the music altogether.

'Like it?' Siggy asked once he'd served the beef and vegetables and tiny buttery noodles.

Jesse searched for the right words to express his sensations. Finally he compromised with, 'I never knew food could taste this way.'

A grin split Siggy's face.

'Who was playing sax just before we came in?' Matthew asked, while Finn mopped up the last of the sauce with his bread.

'A new bloke. Wandered in off the street to ask for a chance to play. Got some real sweet blowin', don't he?' Siggy nodded towards a small table half-hidden by a group of older men, serious eaters from the look of them. 'Just came back in from the alleyway. Picklin' his lights a sight tarter than my sauerbraten, the way he smokes.'

Jesse followed the direction of Siggy's gaze. The lad who was sitting alone, hunched over his plate, seemed to sense Jesse's interest. He raised his head, and they locked eyes. Jesse could feel the spurt of venom cross the space between them, so blinding in intensity that he grasped the table in order not to jerk away. Against, and despite, and contrary to: it was Mick.

When they returned home, the house was still empty. Finn picked up his trumpet and played for half an hour. Unsettled by the encounter with Mick, Jesse stretched out on the sofa and closed his eyes, listening to Finn first run through scales and some exercises, then some old mellow favourites, then a bit of improvisation. He finished up with a couple of blues pieces,

perhaps sensing Jesse's mood. Sarah had misled Jesse. Her dad had a real rapport with his instrument. No one would be knocking on his door with a recording contract, but he was more than just a passable amateur.

Finn laid his trumpet aside and sat down at the piano. He played a few chords, then broke off and asked Jesse about a game of chess.

'Where did you learn to play so well?' Jesse asked.

'Hasn't Sarah told you? I did a couple of years in jazz before changing to fine arts.'

'Norway?'

'No, in London. That's where I met Meg. Now how about that game?'

'OK, fine with me.'

Finn drew white, and they made their opening moves swiftly. It was soon clear that though Finn wasn't an inexperienced player, he'd have to work hard to hold his own. There was not much chance of his checkmating Jesse. Finn was relieved that they weren't playing against the clock.

While Finn considered his moves, Jesse found his thoughts wandering, mostly to the evening at Siggy's. There was something he was missing. How could anyone as crude, as superficial as Mick play the sax like that? It didn't make sense. With a reasonable amount of practice it was always possible to achieve competence, even a certain gloss. But not the sound Jesse had heard. To play with such passion and sensitivity – such complexity – required not only serious talent, but an intimate knowledge of the darkest caverns of the self, a journey that Jesse had been certain Mick would be incapable of making.

Chapter 17

Sarah's mate Thomas dug into the bowl of popcorn.

'What a boring movie,' he said.

Sarah switched off the TV. 'We *could* try a round of charades.'

Thomas snorted and pelted her with a piece of popcorn. She threw him a kiss in return. Jesse frowned, then rose abruptly, snatching up his cigarettes and the black Zippo Finn had given him.

'I'm going to read,' he said.

Sarah and Thomas exchanged glances as Jesse stomped from the room.

'You never did audition for the easy roles, did you?' Thomas said. 'And just wait till Katy gets a look at him.'

'It's not like that.'

Thomas did one of his famous eyebrows. He had a long ugly pockmarked face, pale eyes set very wide apart, and bushy hair that was not so much white as colourless; he was an albino. But he had a wonderful hearty laugh and a way of making fun of himself – and everyone else – that nobody could resist. And he did wicked imitations. His caricatures of politicians and pop stars always brought tears of merriment to Sarah's eyes, though she'd seen his shtik (as he called it) many times before. A brilliant dancer, he was headed for great things. 'Nobody notices how he looks the minute he comes onstage,' Sarah had told Jesse before Thomas arrived. He'd just won some huge scholarship to a school in New York, and would be leaving next year. 'We've been mates forever,' she'd said. 'I'm going to miss him something awful.'

'Listen, there's something I want to tell you now that we're alone,' Thomas said.

Sarah sat up straight. She knew that tone.

'It's about Jesse,' Thomas continued. 'I've been hearing things.'

'What things?'

'Like he's a total screwtop just released from a secure psych unit.'

'That's ridiculous! Who told you that?'

'Ben. Aaron. Even Justine. You know how word gets round.'

Sarah's face was flushed. 'I'll sort them.'

'There's worse.' Thomas chewed his underlip for a moment. 'You've got to promise not to do anything stupid.'

'Thomas!'

'OK, OK. I met Mick at the Doorstop yesterday, he told me your mum's got one of her sex offenders in the house, some sort of new pervy treatment programme.' He hesitated, as if the words might explode upon release. 'And that Jesse caught him in the loo and tried to bugger him.'

Thomas hadn't ever seen quite that expression on Sarah's face before.

Jesse was halfway across the kitchen when he noticed the glow of Finn's pipe on the patio.

'You ought to be in bed with that cold,' Finn said.

'Just making a cup of tea.'

Finn pointed his pipe at the sky. 'It's strange how memory works,' he said. 'When Peter was very small, he used to count the stars. He made up his own number for them. But no matter how hard I try, I can't remember the word.'

'Kwakabazillion,' Jesse murmured before he realised what he was doing.

There was a long silence.

'Say that again.' Finn spoke in a voice Jesse hadn't heard from him before – slow and careful and uninflected – the voice of a cracked bell, of a father opening the door to a constable at three a.m.

Jesse bit his lip and cursed his treacherous tongue. 'It's a common –'

'Try that on the police or a teacher or a social worker, if you must, but not on me. Not on us.'

Jesse sighed and dug his hands into his pockets, encountering Peter's top. What could he tell Finn? That he had no idea where the word had come from? That it had dropped into his mind without bang or whimper?

'I just knew it.' Jesse said. 'I don't know how.'

A muscle in Finn's cheek tightened – even in the dark the movement was visible.

'Who are you?' he whispered. It sounded as though he were breathing through a stab wound in his chest.

Jesse rolled the top between his fingers. Who am I, he thought bitterly. Even Finn needs to ask.

Multiple-choice question for Finn. Who is Jesse? (a) a bag of memories; (b) a genetic code; (c) a skinsack filled with soon-to-be-discarded parts (some fungible); (d) an occasional thought; (e) a carbon-based computer; (f) a set of vibrating strings; (g) a murderer; (h) a fiction; (i) a fucking freak ... Choose one or more of the above. Or all. Or none.

But don't forget the feelings.

The next morning Mick answered the doorbell in nothing but cut-offs. His skin was very tanned, and despite herself Sarah couldn't help following the golden pilgrimage into the waistband of his jeans. He noticed the direction of her gaze and smiled.

'Sarah. What a surprise,' he drawled. 'What brings you out at this hour?'

Sarah ignored his tone, determined not to lose her temper before she began. 'May I come in?'

'May you? Allow me to consider. The butler has the day off, but the maid has finished downstairs. And I do believe the cook has already prepared a light repast. So unless you require a five-course meal, I can offer you the hospitality of my humble abode.' He swept into a bow worthy of a royal audience, his accent perfect.

If she weren't so angry, she would have laughed. She'd forgotten why she'd first gone out with him – though moody since Dan had left, Mick could

be funny and very charming when he chose. And he played sax like a demon.

He took her hand and kissed it, holding it just a little too long. Sarah snatched it away, the joke had gone far enough. She moved past him into the entrance hall. The walls were painted, rather startlingly, a deep sumptuous blue against the polished oak of the floors and banister. His mother's collection of antique Danish porcelain was mounted along the right wall. Again Sarah was impressed by the subtle good taste which the decor reflected. Mick's flashy personality seemed out of place here. Sarah had never met his parents, and though he and his brother were identical in appearance, Dan had always been quieter, more self-contained – 'dark,' Thomas had said even before the drug stuff. 'There's something wrong, he's way too secretive. And I think he manipulates Mick. Even for twins, it's a strange relationship.'

Mick crossed his arms and leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb to the sitting room, watching her without speaking.

'Can we sit down?' she asked. 'There's something important I need to talk to you about.'

The skin around his eyes tightened at the stiffness in her voice.

'Important,' he repeated. 'Yeah, OK. Maybe we'd better go upstairs where we won't be overheard.' He added at her frown, 'We really do have a housekeeper, a very nosy housekeeper, you know. Who likes to spy on me and report back to my parents.'

Sarah followed him with reluctance upstairs. Mick didn't just have a bedroom like most kids his age. His parents had converted the entire upper floor – not a loft, either – into a private suite for their sons, complete with sitting room and en suite baths. Mick had his own study where he kept his piano and saxophones – not just one, of course, but an entire collection, one of which he claimed had been used by John Coltrane. There was even a small workout room, equipped with an assortment of body-building devices. Sarah had tried the treadmill the last time she'd been here, before they had fooled around in the jacuzzi. And his entertainment centre would have been the envy of any pop star. Dan's bedroom, however, was out of bounds.

Sarah was dismayed to find a stranger lounging in a pair of boxer shorts on the black leather sofa. He was watching TV and smoking. She looked closer, sniffed. Not tobacco.

The bloke was a few years older than Mick, perhaps even in his early twenties. He was as blond and good-looking as Mick, though in a more finished way. The streaks in his hair swaggered across his forehead. As Mick and Sarah came into the room, he clicked off the TV and stood up, oblivious to his state of near undress – no, not oblivious at all, Sarah realised. He didn't take his eyes off her as they were introduced. Gavin's green eyes were the colour of mouldy bread and faintly bloodshot.

'Sarah's an old flame,' Mick said.

'An old flame.' Gavin said. His tongue curled wetly around the antiquated expression like a French kiss. There was definitely something wrong with his eyes.

'She's a fantastic dancer,' Mick said. 'It's a real treat to disco with her.'

Sarah could tell by the way that Gavin glanced at Mick that there was a hidden message in Mick's words, but she had no idea what it could be. She was beginning to regret her impulse. Seeing Mick on his home ground reminded her of what she disliked most about him. A golden boy who'd never think of anyone but himself. Not someone you could reason with. She turned to Mick.

'I didn't know you had another visitor. I'll go.'

'I thought you wanted to talk to me.'

'Alone. It's a private matter.'

'Gavin's a good friend. The very best, in fact. There's nothing you can't say in front of him. Or *reveal* ...' Lazily he scratched his belly button. 'Actually, three's quite a comfy crowd.'

God, he really thought he was being so clever.

'Never mind, Mick, I'll wait in the bedroom. Call me when you're ready.' Gavin flashed Sarah a brief grin, then flicked his hair back ostentatiously. He gave Mick a long intent look, a look that raised the temperature in the already over-warm room. With spliff and ashtray in his hand, he sauntered into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

'Come on, Sarah, sit down. I'll fetch you a coke.'

Mick left before Sarah had a chance to refuse. The air stifling, she thought about opening one of the windows but decided not to bother. She'd drink her coke and go. Maybe Thomas would think of another way to deal with Mick.

'So tell me, what's the problem?' Mick asked, handing her a glass. He sat down next to her, crowding her. She could smell his maleness – disturbing, familiar.

Sarah sipped her coke, both thirsty and glad to buy some time. Ice cubes clinking like hail on a glass roof. Mick lit a cigarette and watched her through the smoke, his gaze knowing. Sarah coloured faintly and shifted a bit on the sofa. Her skirt was rather short, and her thighs were sticking to the leather. Mick moved even nearer, his body pressing right up against hers. She could feel beads of perspiration gathering on her upper lip, under her arms, between her breasts. Mick was so close that it was hard for her to breathe, to think. She longed to shut her eyes. Her heart squeezed against her ribs. She needed some air. Why had Jesse ...

Abruptly she realised what was happening. No. Not again. Not with him, with Mick. She tried to push further into the corner, but there was no place to go. Mick put his hand on her leg, just under the hem of her skirt. She jumped and spilled a bit of her coke. She set her glass on the table.

'Don't,' she said. 'Please.'

Mick took another drag on his cigarette and laid it on the edge of the table. He smiled languidly but didn't remove his hand.

'Why not?' he asked. 'You liked it before.'

Sarah shook her head, pushed at his hand.

'Oh come on, Sarah. It's no big deal.'

'I said *no*, and I meant it.'

She tried to rise. Mick propelled her back against the cushions with a casual flick of his wrist. He leaned towards her, ready to kiss her.

'You don't really mean no. Just relax and enjoy it.'

A tiny corner of her mind couldn't believe he'd actually said that. How could she want to laugh when his hand was crawling up her thigh?

'Please, Mick,' she said. 'Not *now*. My period.'

Mick hesitated, then reached for his cigarette, drew on it, and blew a smoke ring. He studied it until it dissipated. Then he grinned.

'I like bloodsports.'

Desperately she searched for an excuse, something, anything to put him off. 'Your friend. He's in the next room.'

'Gavin? Don't worry about him. He won't mind.' A snigger.

'But I thought –'

Mick drew back a fraction. 'You thought what?'

'That you and he ... I mean, the way he looked at you ... I thought ...' Her voice trailed off, some instinct warning her that she was making a mistake, that in fact she'd already made it.

Mick's eyes narrowed and his pupils shrank to pinpricks. He extinguished his cigarette slowly in the ashtray.

'What exactly did you think?' His voice was soft, dangerous – a viper's hiss.

'Nothing,' she said as neutrally as possible.

'Tell me.'

He leaned forward, at the same time moving his hand back up under her skirt.

'No.'

'No what? No, don't touch you here' – his hand slid to her knickers – 'or no, you're not going to tell me what you were thinking?' His smile was suddenly friendly, teasing. As if he were just messing around.

Sarah swallowed. Maybe he'd let up if she gave him what he wanted to hear. 'I thought the two of you might be more than just friends. I'm sorry if I got it wrong.'

'Wrong?' he mused, as if he were in a classroom and had been just corrected by the teacher. He removed his hand and stared at it.

'I'm sorry,' she repeated, feeling an immense sense of relief. 'Not that it would matter. Nobody needs to hide being gay any more. Or bi.'

'Gay, did you say?' He was still staring at his hand.

'Look, Mick, I misunderstood. Dan seemed not to mind if –'

He lunged so fast that the breath was knocked from her lungs. In an instant he was on top of her.

'Gay,' he spat. 'I'll show you gay.'

He had one hand on her left breast, and the other on her throat. His mouth ground against hers, his teeth cutting her lip. She could feel his erection. She could smell his sweat underneath the musky cologne he used. Her heart was pounding. She managed to twist her head to the side. She thought she would gag. Then she thought she would suffocate. She couldn't seem to get any air. He tilted her neck back and moved his mouth to her throat. Drawing in a ragged breath, she tasted blood in her mouth.

'No,' she croaked.

'You know you really want it.'

'No!'

'Nobody says *no* to me,' he said, leaning back just enough to look at her face but no further. His eyes glittered, and his smile was cold; his groin, relentless.

'No! No!'

Suddenly everything spiralled out of control. Mick was no longer smiling. He was spitting words like *cunt* and *bitch* at her. He slapped her across the face. She gouged him with her fingers. He clamped his hand on her wrist. She wrenched it free. He yanked at her shirt and tore it. She struggled against him. He reached under her skirt, hooked his fingers into the thin cotton. She would not let him do this. He was strong, so very strong. Why had she worn a skirt? She twisted, she flailed at him, she bit his shoulder. He grunted in pain and grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulled it hard to one side. She gasped, and tears spurted into her eyes. She was beginning to pant. To panic.

The door to the bedroom opened. 'Hey,' Gavin called. Mick relaxed his hold on Sarah. His eyes followed her gaze. For a moment she thought that Gavin was coming to her aid. Then she saw that he'd stripped completely. Mick stared, then looked away, then back again. He seemed to be having trouble controlling his face.

'Man, you've got one hell of a boner,' he said.

'You two are making a lot of noise,' Gavin said. He walked over and locked the door, picked up the remote, switched the TV back on. Pounding music filled the room. 'Let's bring the cunt into the bedroom.'

Sarah sagged back against the cushions and closed her eyes. She couldn't believe this was happening. Snatches of advice ran through her head. Don't get yourself into dangerous situations. Say no. Kick him in the balls. Scream. Always fight back. Say no. *No. God no.*

They half dragged, half carried her into the bedroom and dumped her on the white shag rug. Gavin kicked her.

'Get up,' he said. 'Strip.'

She shook her head, knowing it was pointless. He kicked her again while Mick shed his jeans.

'Not her face,' said Mick.

And again, in the small of her back. Gavin wrenched off her clothes while Mick watched, breathing hard. He wiped his hand across his face and retreated a step, glancing at a poster on the wall – a photo of Dan and him on a beach, arms draped round each other, sunburnt, laughing – then back at her. In some part of herself – the part that wasn't paralysed by terror – she suddenly understood the expression 'time froze'. For it did. No one moved. No one spoke. Even the music seemed to recede to a distant and ghostly place. It was as if the three of them were poised together on the fulcrum of an invisible seesaw. Which way would it descend? Sarah thought she saw something flicker in Mick's eyes, some warmth, but at that moment Gavin grunted and lurched forward. He grabbed up a leather belt lying on the bed and struck her across the belly. A red mist blossomed behind her eyes, clouding her vision.

Jesse, she thought. Jesse.

She must have spoken aloud.

‘Jesse?’ Mick sneered. Any compassion he might have been feeling vanished. ‘That fucking pervert? Tondi told me all about him. You’ll get nothing from him. He doesn’t like girls.’

Gavin smashed his fist into her breast. She screamed. He clamped a hand over her mouth. ‘Shut up,’ he snarled. The music beat against her in huge waves, threatening to drown her.

‘She said we were gay,’ Mick said.

‘Us? Gay?’

They laughed together.

‘She likes gay. Nice. So let’s start with gay.’ Mick bowed, sweeping his arm towards Gavin in a gesture of exaggerated deference. ‘Go ahead. Show her just how *gay* it can be.’

Gavin rolled her over onto her stomach. Sarah let the music take her. It became a howl, then a savage roar. Jesse, she heard herself cry again as the light gave way; gave way to deep-sea black.

Chapter 18

and a small winged dragon curls herself into a ball as a foot comes down and kicks her and her cries slice through his head into a jumble of limbs and grunts while wake up he tells himself it's a nightmare of pounding music and slick bodies dancing writhing with the hot smell of sweat running shrieking into the flames and their screams always the screams wake up before they die this time wake up wake up wake up

Jesse gasped and tore open his eyes.

'No don't,' he said, his voice cracked and peeling.

He lay still while the images from his dream loosed their stranglehold. He'd been sweating, and heavily; he could feel the sheet sticking to his skin. Then he shuddered and held his breath – this was more than sweat he smelled.

Jesse found Finn at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee, a dictionary, scribbled sheets of paper, and a scattering of pens at hand, and his laptop open in front of him. He looked up as Jesse came into the room.

'You're awake,' Finn said. 'How's the cold? Still feel feverish?'

'Where's Sarah?'

'She's gone to an exhibit in the city,' Finn said, disconcerted by the abruptness of Jesse's manner.

'Call her mobile.'

Finn stared at him.

'Now!'

Jesse's urgency was beginning to affect Finn. He rose and fetched the phone from the worktop, punched a couple of keys. He listened for a moment.

'It's ringing,' he said. Then he frowned. 'She picked up, but we were disconnected.'

'Try again,' Jesse said.

Finn pressed redial and let it ring for a while. 'Unavailable.'

They looked at each other.

'Tell me what this is about,' Finn said.

Jesse put a hand to his head. Suddenly he needed to sit down fast. He pulled out a chair and sank into it, lowered his head to the table. Finn came over to his side and laid a hand on his shoulder.

'What is it, Jesse? Dizzy?'

'Sarah's in trouble. What are we going to do?' Jesse muttered.

'How do you know?'

Jesse raised his head. Finn was shocked by the look on Jesse's face. He'd seen that kind of despair before, in far too many places. In the mirror.

'While I was sleeping –' Jesse floundered, unable to formulate a coherent explanation. He grimaced as though Thor were using his skull for hammer

practice. 'I don't know how I know. I just do,' he finished lamely. It was becoming a familiar refrain.

'I'm going to ring Meg.'

'Meg. Yeah, ring Meg. I hadn't thought of that. She'll know if something's happened to Sarah, won't she?'

Finn hesitated. Jesse's faith in Meg's abilities, though touching, was misplaced. A mind like Meg's couldn't be switched on and off like a light bulb.

'It doesn't always work like that, you know,' Finn said.

Some colour had returned to Jesse's face. 'Stop wasting time. Ring her!'

To his surprise Finn reached Meg at once. She listened, then asked to speak with Jesse. The conversation was very one-sided, Jesse answering mostly in monosyllables.

In the meantime Finn used his own mobile to try Sarah again. He'd feel much better if he knew that she was really all right. Which was not only unnecessary but clearly obsessive, wasn't it? He reminded himself that anxiety was contagious. Sarah had only switched off her mobile. He'd done the same a thousand times over while in a meeting or during a shoot.

Jesse had known about kwakabazillion.

'Meg wants to speak to you,' Jesse said.

He handed Finn the telephone. Jesse had got his face under control, but not his eyes. Finn thought that Jesse would never be able to mask the depth of feeling to be plumbed there.

'Finn?' Meg's voice broke into his thoughts. 'Give Jesse two nurofen and see that he goes back to bed. I'll be home as soon as I can get away.'

'There's nothing the matter, is there?' Finn felt compelled to ask, even though Jesse hadn't left the room, was in fact watching him from the window to which he'd retreated, squinting as if the light were blistering his optic nerve.

'We'll talk about it when I get there.'

Finn's hand tightened on the phone. Meg spoke composedly enough, but he knew her very well and recognised what he liked to call her *shrink voice*. She always smiled whenever he teased her about it. Both he and Sarah hated it when she used it on them.

'What is it? What aren't you telling me?'

'Finn, there's nothing we can do for the moment.'

Now the first stirring of real fear. 'Meg, don't do this. Tell me what's going on.'

'I don't *know* what's going on.'

That was when Finn realised Jesse might be right about Sarah. 'Where is she?' he bellowed into the phone.

'Losing your temper won't help anybody.'

'Don't give me that fucking line of crap!'

'Finn, listen to me. It may be nothing at all, just fever and bad dreams. Jesse needs you to stay calm. Get him into bed till I come home. I'll try to arrange for David to take over a bit earlier.'

Finn closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths, and succeeded in holding his fear – and his anger – in check. 'OK, I hear you. Do you – ?'

'Look, I've got to go. Don't worry. We'll sort it out.' And then she was gone.

Finn slammed the phone down. She treated him like an adolescent sometimes, like another of her children. Or a patient. It was intolerable. Hands clenched, he strode to the refrigerator, yanked it open, and pulled out a bottle of lemonade. Jesse watched him without speaking.

'Want some?' Finn asked.

Jesse nodded.

Finn poured them each a glass. He drank his at a gulp, the cold making his teeth ache and his throat burn as it slid down his gullet. Jesse sipped his slowly, as if it hurt for him to swallow. By the time Finn had finished his second glass, his temper had cooled. He went to the window and stared out, chewing his lip. For all her gifts, Meg hadn't been able to help trace Peter, had she?

'You'd better go lie down. I'll bring you your tablets,' Finn said.

After putting his glass into the dishwasher, Finn moved to the table and saved the changes he'd made while Jesse had been asleep. In no mood to work on the bloody translation, Finn wished he hadn't agreed to do it, even as a favour to his brother.

'You blame Meg, don't you? For Peter's death?' Jesse asked.

His face savage for an instant, Finn rounded on Jesse. Then, expression softening like wax held too close to a flame, Finn turned away. After a hesitation, Jesse went over and touched Finn tentatively on the arm.

'You told me yourself it doesn't work like that,' Jesse said. 'Meg's not a fortune-teller.'

'It's got nothing to do with palm-reading and tarot cards and all that sort of crap,' Finn said.

'Then tell me why you're so angry at her.'

'I can't talk about it.'

'Can't? Or won't?' Jesse paused, then added, 'I'm just a kid, aren't I? A fucked-up street kid who's got no business asking. And who couldn't possibly understand anyway.'

'Bollocks. You heard me. I don't want to talk about it. So zip it.'

Jesse made a noise halfway between a sob and a snarl. 'And if something happens to Sarah, who will you blame then?'

Finn struck him across the face.

Huddled on the bed, Jesse found himself close to shaking. His cheek didn't really sting any more, only the memory of the slap. He picked up the top and rubbed it between his fingers until heat began to rise from the wood. The rest of him felt cold. He'd failed Sarah. And alienated Finn with stupid taunts. Jesse laid the top against his cheek. For the first time in years, he'd found decent people, people he could respect. And what did he do? He deserved to be struck.

It's no good, Jesse thought. Liam was right. Mal was right. Even I was right. I can't live with them ... with anyone. It was stupid to try. Better to be alone than end up like Mal and Angie.

He who is alone now, will remain alone ... will wander the streets restlessly ...

A soft knock, and the door opened. Finn stood on the threshold, his face sombre.

'May I come in?' he asked.

'Suit yourself,' said Jesse, shrugging. After one quick look, he refused to meet Finn's eyes.

Finn crossed the room and sat down on Jesse's bed, careful to leave a space between them. Leaning forward, he propped his forearms on his knees so that his spare tyre rolled comfortably over his waistband. There was a long silence, broken only by the faint snuffle of Nubi's breathing.

'I'm sorry,' Finn finally said. 'I don't know what came over me. I haven't hit anyone in years.' He gave a little snort of laughter. 'Well no, that's not quite true. There was this nasty bloke in Santiago last year ... You don't ever want to punch a policeman in Chile.'

'You're kidding me.'

'Nope. Spent a couple of nights in gaol fending off the cockroaches – the two-legged variety. I've even got the release papers tucked away somewhere to prove it.'

'Is Sarah back?' Jesse asked, although he knew the question was futile.

'Not yet.'

'Have you tried her mobile again?'

'Three times. Also sent her a text.' Finn eyed Jesse. 'I got an answer: *be back soon.*'

'Anyone could have sent it.'

'So you still think something's the matter?'

'Yeah.'

Finn looked down at his hands. His wedding ring was a simple gold band which had grown a bit tight in recent years. He slid it back and forth a few times. He wasn't being entirely honest with Jesse. Of course he knew why he'd lashed out, just as he understood Jesse's feelings of impotence and frustration. No one remembered better than Finn himself how he'd raged at anyone and everyone in the months after Peter had left. It had been touch and go for a while with Meg. Sometimes he wished there would be public floggings for the mistakes you made in life – for the people you hurt, the kids you damaged.

'Fear deranges faster than the worst addiction,' Finn said softly.

Jesse felt even more ashamed of his outburst. 'I shouldn't have said that to you.'

'But you were right. It's more comfortable to blame someone else than yourself.' Finn straightened his shoulders and scowled at Jesse with mock severity. 'And don't you dare tell me that we all do it.'

'It would never cross my mind to say anything so banal.'

Finn grinned. 'Touché.'

Jesse ran his hands through his hair. 'Meg told me that she'd been smelling burnt almonds all day long. Does that make any sense to you?'

'Meg usually doesn't talk much about what she sees. But there are certain motifs that seem to recur. Smells or colours or sounds, anything really. In a poem, you'd call them symbols, I suppose. But Meg says that

they're the mind's way of processing, of conceptualising the unfathomable. Apparently we don't learn symbol-making. It's an innate capacity – a biological function, evolved since god knows when.' His eyes gleamed. 'Maybe something like the *god cells* in the brain neuroscientists are starting to talk about.'

'You still haven't told me about the burnt almonds.'

Finn began to play with his ring again. It took him a long time to answer. 'Meg smelled burnt almonds a lot after Peter disappeared.'

'I'm frightened,' Jesse whispered. Had he ever admitted that to anyone before? He couldn't remember.

It was an ephemeral gift, fragile and translucent as a soap bubble, and Finn held it between his hands with surprising delicacy.

'So am I, Jesse.'

The screen-saver was up – one of those impossible Escher staircases, ascending and descending in a perpetual enigma, which usually amused Jesse but now irritated him. He hit a key, expecting to see his desktop appear. Instead, the image remained in place. Jesse cursed, thinking that the computer had frozen again. Then a flicker under the bell tower caught his attention. A monk was pulling on the bellrope so that a large blue top swung slowly from side to side, the only spot of colour in the entire frame.

Jesse slammed down the lid of the laptop. Cursing himself even more colourfully, he nevertheless groped among the books and odds-and-ends on the bedside table for the top. It wasn't there.

Jesse sat down with his head in his hands. I'm not mad, he told himself. He knew he ought to forget the top, but instead he searched the bed with care, lifting pillow and shaking out duvet, then dropped to his knees and peered underneath the frame. The effort intensified his headache. When he closed his eyes, a pattern of red and orange sparks fired behind his lids.

'Sod this,' he muttered. 'Who needs a top anyway?'

A strong odour of lavender assailed him. His stomach clenched, accompanied by a renewed feeling of urgency. As he rose to his feet his eyes fell on his pillow. The blue top lay in plain sight, a small length of string dangling from its handle.

Chapter 19

The floor of Mick's bedroom. Mick and Gavin smoking in the next room. The music still audible but no longer booming. Mick had told her she was welcome to bath. He'd opened the large wardrobe with a smile, 'Borrow what you like.' As if nothing were the matter.

Drowsily Sarah drifted into a snowy landscape where she huddled under the boughs of a tall pine sheltering her from the heavy flakes, which blinded her whenever she ventured to escape. Better to remain – the cold had ceased to be painful. Slowly, in fact, a delicious lethargy began to invade her mind. Here she could sleep. Here she could dream.

But her body had its own urgency – eventually it roused her. In slow motion she levered herself upright. She licked her lips, which were caked with dried blood. It hurt to breathe, and it hurt to move, but Sarah knew that she needed to get herself out of here before she could begin to think about what had happened. She hugged her ribs for a long time, shivering and unable to budge. There seemed to a roadblock between her brain and her muscles. Every time she told herself to get up, her numb legs wouldn't obey. Only after she massaged them roughly did the pins-and-needles diminish and she trust herself to stand. She leaned on the laughter from the next room like a crutch. Just get home, she told herself over and over again.

Much as the prospect of wearing Mick's things sickened her, she could hardly leave in what was left of her own clothes. She knew that you were supposed to go straight to the police without washing. An examination, tests. They should be stopped, a voice in her head told her. But it was small and weak and came from a great distance. As if the law ever meant anything to people like Mick. His parents had plenty of money.

How could she tell anyone what they'd done?

Don't think about it. Think about going to the toilet, cleaning yourself up, getting dressed somehow, walking downstairs, then out the front door. Step by step. But there was no way she could make it home in a bus, or even as far as the bus stop. She had her mobile, if they hadn't wrecked it. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of the sighing of the wind, a thick drifting of snow, and a single blackbird. She was so cold again.

For a moment she considered ringing Finn, then discarded the idea. His rage would be colossal, and incalculable. She sometimes wondered if her father were capable of murder – those fights with Peter, the months afterwards. If Finn ever learned what she'd done ... Was this her punishment at last? She'd hoped that by helping Jesse –

Jesse. Oh god, Jesse ...

Sarah closed her eyes and pressed a fist to her mouth, hard against her teeth, but she couldn't hold in the ragged cry as they drove and drove again, cleaving her life, her self-respect, her *soul*. Now the blood ran red and hot and thick in her veins. It beat back the snow. Her mind shrieked: kill them kill them kill them *kill them*

There was no bolt of lightning. No avenging angel. No earthquake which sundered the ground beneath their feet.

Sarah could hear more laughter from the next room.

No matter how open her parents were – how understanding – there was no way she could tell her father this. Not even if she sent him a letter from another continent.

And most of all, she couldn't bear for Jesse to know.

Once, after hours and hours of effort, she hadn't been able to manage a very difficult ballet sequence and had been reduced to tears. Her teacher had reminded her of Agnes de Mille's famous words: it never becomes easy to dance; it becomes possible.

Sarah had finally mastered the steps; and she would somehow find a way to conceal what they'd done from Jesse.

Slowly she dragged herself to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. There were fewer bruises than she expected, and none above her breasts. The face which looked back at her was strangely unchanged, which shocked her. She had expected to see a profound difference. Wasn't the face a reflection of her essence? her self? Or was that as much an illusion as everything else she'd always believed? She thought of Jesse's quirky mouth, his mysterious and expressive eyes. If she couldn't read his face ... Had they taken *that* away from her as well?

She stared at her image until the need to wee became overwhelming. Seat raised, the toilet gaped at her like a cold and voracious mouth, and she slammed it shut. There was a stall shower as well as a tub; the shower would do. She ran the hot water and, meanwhile, rinsed her mouth at the washbasin, then drank and drank from the cold tap until she could hold no more. Carefully she stepped under the stinging spray, peed, let the scalding water beat against her skin until it came up red. She leaned her head against the antiseptic white tiles while she showered. The shower gel smelled masculine, and she wouldn't touch it. Jesse, she thought, but didn't cry.

She'd finished dressing when Mick came into the bedroom. She looked at him without speaking.

'Shall I ring for a taxi?' he asked, as if they'd just been out to dinner and the theatre.

She would have liked to refuse, but there were no other viable options.

'That was rather exciting, wasn't it?' he asked.

She stared at him.

He backed her up against the wall without actually touching her. She smelled his cologne, the weed on his breath. Those odours would start her stomach churning even years later. With a disarming smile he looked down at her. Her heart beat heavily. She concentrated on keeping her breathing as steady as possible, grateful for her dancer's training. Fleeting, she thought that she would never be nervous before a mere performance again. She returned his gaze, afraid that he would take advantage of any sign of weakness. But whether he was reacting to her feelings or simply indifferent to them, he lifted her chin with one finger and kissed her. When she didn't respond, he laid one hand against the back of her head and with the other encircled her throat and began to press. She gagged and opened her mouth.

'I love your hair,' he said when he'd finished, smoothing back a damp lock.

Sarah made an ambiguous sound in her throat. Fortunately Mick didn't seem to expect a response; he was staring above her head at the poster with a glassy, unfocused cast to his eyes, and it struck her that he might not even be aware of what he'd said. She had the feeling that she'd wandered onto the set of a bizarre psychodrama. Had he *forgotten* what they'd done to her?

Mick snapped out of his trance. Unblinking, he lowered his gaze to her face, and she noticed that his pupils had shrunk to dark keyholes in his ice-blue irises. A muscle in his cheek was twitching.

'Has he kissed you?' he asked.

Sarah had no idea what Mick was talking about. Better to say nothing than risk provoking him. She was beginning to shiver again, and she was afraid that if she didn't get away soon, she wouldn't have the strength to walk downstairs and climb into a taxi.

'I've asked you a question.'

'I don't know what you mean. Who you mean.'

'That tosser. Jesse. Has he tried to shag you? to kiss you?'

'No.'

Mick smiled broadly, with satisfaction, but his eyes glinted with another message, one she found difficult to interpret. For a moment she wondered if Mick and Jesse had already met before she'd introduced them.

Mick went to the door. 'I'll tell the taxi driver you'll be waiting on the doorstep.'

He half closed the door behind him, then stopped and opened it again, as if a sudden parting thought had occurred to him.

'It wouldn't be wise to use the word *gay* about me again.' His voice was a long sharp icicle composed merely of water, but able to inflict mortal injury.

She vomited in the toilet before she left.

The ride home prolonged by traffic, Sarah leaned her head against the side window of the cab. The afternoon sun, still strong, wrapped her in a somnolent cocoon which reminded her of lazy afternoons in her grandmother Inge's garden, and the smell of a sour cherry tart cooling on the window ledge for tea. Off and on she drowsed, then jerked awake, heart pounding and senses alert, only to find that they hadn't travelled very far. And then slipped back again into the capsule of golden filaments where dream and reality merged, and the cherry tart waited in its baking dish, warm and glistening and fragrant, never to be sliced, never to be devoured; and a nightmare stayed firmly between the plates – more solid than stoneware, more fragile than porcelain – of your skull.

Sarah was glad that the driver was one of the quiet ones. He concentrated on the road, leaving her to sleep or think. The radio was playing softly – an opera, she later had the feeling. And she remembered seeing a paperback copy of something difficult, Proust or Faust, on the front seat. So maybe a student. They may have exchanged a few words. She could only recall that he frowned with genuine concern, not impatience, as she hung on to the open door of the taxi for a few seconds after stepping to the

ground. 'Do you need any help?' he asked with a gentle, sunny, and not unpleasant accent.

Mick had paid the driver in advance. Sarah stumbled up the path and let herself in by the front door. If she just made it to her room before anyone saw her, she'd be able to crawl under the covers, from where it would be easy to plead a headache, a cold coming on.

'Meg?' Finn called from the kitchen as soon as she'd closed the door.

'No, it's me, Finn,' Sarah said, forcing herself to speak naturally.

Finn came into the entrance hall.

'You're home,' he said with a strange note in his voice. 'Everything all right?'

'Of course.'

'How was the exhibit?'

'Exhibit?'

Finn scrutinised her face.

'Are you sure you're OK? You seem, I don't know, upset somehow.'

'I'm fine. It was hot and crowded, that's all. Very noisy. I've got a headache. I think I'll go lie down.'

'You've been gone for quite some time.'

'I had a coffee with Jane afterwards. You know how it is, you get to chatting.'

'Why didn't you ring back? I texted two or three times, rang at least twice that.'

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing. I just wanted to know where you were.'

'Since when have you started checking up on me? Jane's got problems with her boyfriend, we didn't want to be disturbed, OK?'

Finn rubbed his beard, and Sarah could tell that he wasn't entirely convinced, and was trying to decide what was wrong with her story. For a moment it looked as though he'd challenge her, but then he nodded and even managed a halting smile. OK, his shoulders signalled, I wish you could trust me, but keep it to yourself if you must.

'Go have a rest. You look rather pale. Or do you want to eat first? I've made a mushroom risotto and a salad.'

She shook her head and moved for the stairs. She began to climb, slower than she'd have liked, but fast enough at least to give the impression that her legs weren't on the verge of collapse.

Finn called after her. 'Maybe you're coming down with Jesse's cold. Meg will be home soon. I'll send her up for a look at you.'

Sarah sighed dramatically. 'It's a headache, not bubonic plague. I'll take a couple of nurofen and sleep. Tell her not to wake me.'

In her room Sarah shed Mick's garments, bundled them into a plastic carrier bag, and hid them in her wardrobe. After a hesitation, she opened one of those little aeroplane bottles of vodka – she couldn't even remember who'd given it to her – and drank it off quickly, grimacing at the taste. The second

bottle was easier to get down. Then she showered again, but had no strength left to wash her hair; it would have to wait till morning. Since the vodka hadn't quite dispelled a lingering foul taste, she scrubbed her teeth. Shivering again after the shower, she donned the warmest pyjamas she could find, fetched her quilt and two extra woollen blankets from the top shelf of her wardrobe, drew the curtains, and burrowed into her bed. After a period of tossing and turning, when she seriously considered rummaging in her mother's supplies for sleeping pills, she gradually began to relax. She sweated a little under the thick layer of blankets. She muttered a few words. She changed position. But once she slept, she slept on and on.

Jesse opened the door. The room was dark, but he could make out Sarah's form curled on her side under the covers heaped on the bed. What was she doing with so many blankets? He watched her for a while without moving. Her breathing was slow and regular, a deep sleep. His head still ached, and his throat when he swallowed, but at least he could think without that awful sense of disquiet. Somehow in the long hours of waiting and dreading, berating and tormenting himself, twisting Peter's top round and round in his fingers, he'd fallen asleep. He had the feeling that Meg had come in once and asked him some questions, but the memory was vague and sketchy, and he might have dreamt it. And Nubi had definitely licked his face in the middle of another firedream. But at some point in sleep his anxiety had lessened, and when he'd woken up properly, he'd known straight off that Sarah had returned.

But something was still wrong. He could feel it deep within the shadows of the room. Softly he closed the door, even more softly he moved to the bed. Sarah stirred when he sat down but didn't wake. Even in the near dark he could see a line of sweat along her upper lip. His left hand moved forward almost of its own volition, till he snatched it back at the last minute. Don't wake her, he told himself. When his hand reached out again, this time towards her hair, he rose abruptly and paced back and forth in the darkness.

Thoughts of Liam tormented Jesse. He could see Liam's face, so clever and so mocking; hear his beautiful lilting voice reading from some of his favourite poets; feel his hands and his lips and his tongue. There had been nobody since Liam, nor was there going to be. Back and forth Jesse paced, back and forth, gripping his arms, clenching and unclenching his fingers.

At last he dropped his hands and sat down gingerly next to Sarah, trying not to jostle her. He pushed the covers aside so that they formed a small mound between them. Sarah made a soft yearning noise in her throat, the sound of an injured animal that both wanted and was terrified of succour. Instinctively Jesse shifted towards her.

Sarah cried out and rolled away from him. She clutched the duvet to her chest. Her eyes were wide and unseeing, the pupils fully dilated.

'No!' she cried hoarsely. 'No!'

Jesse reached out with upturned palm, the same gesture he would have used with any frightened creature, as unthreatening as he could make it.

But she shrank back, uttered a guttural cry, and began to shake uncontrollably. Jesse dropped his hand in dismay.

He watched her steadily. Not daring to touch her, he began to hum one of his grandmother's songs. Though it didn't seem to make any difference, he continued in a low and soothing voice, recalling the childhood melodies that had most comforted him. A heavy stone was hanging round his neck, and he had to struggle to breathe, much less to sing.

After a long time Sarah stared at him with something like recognition.

'Jesse?' she asked, her voice still tight with fear.

'Yeah.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Do you want me to leave?'

She bit her lip and looked away.

'No,' she said eventually. 'Please stay.'

'Can I get you a glass of water? Tea?'

Sarah shook her head. Her eyes were wide and dry, and though she wanted to smile at him, all she could do was swallow hard, hoping to dislodge the lump of shame clinging like a fat slug to her throat, and pick, pick at her cuticles.

'Sarah,' he asked gently, 'what's happened?'

At his tone of voice she began to shiver again. Jesse felt her torment deep within his own body. Unable to bear it any longer, he laid his arm round her shoulders, but nothing more. He knew about permission.

At first she resisted. He could feel the stiffening in her muscles, the pulling back against his touch. He relaxed his hold a bit but kept his arm in place, willing it lightness and warmth. They breathed together. For a long time they simply breathed together.

After her shivering began to abate, Jesse lay back, drawing Sarah with him. She nestled her head against his chest, her breath tickling his neck. Without speaking both of them closed their eyes and sank into the comfort of each other's presence. Jesse knew that she'd been through something rough. Why did it feel as if the stone were as much his as hers? While Sarah knew that she was being given something far more precious than a kiss. And she was amazed at how her heart could dance when it was heavy as a boulder, and filled with pain.

'They raped me,' Sarah said. 'I went there to talk to Mick, and they raped me. Mick and his friend.'

Jesse's arm tightened around her but he said nothing.

'I didn't mean to tell you,' she said. 'I'm so ashamed.'

'The shame's theirs, not yours.'

Sarah made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. 'You don't know what it feels like.'

The air in the room seemed to thicken, as though filling with a pall of smoke.

'Look at me, Sarah.'

She could see his eyes glittering in the dark. He raised himself, and though it would have been easier without light, switched on the bedside lamp. Swiftly he tugged his T-shirt over his head, turning so that she could see the scars on his back: hard, ridged, the texture of cold oatmeal yet with a

translucent mother-of-pearl sheen. She traced a tentative finger along the spine of one long weal, feeling him struggle not to flinch.

‘Do they hurt?’

‘No, they’re just very ugly.’

‘They’re not ugly.’

He was quiet for a long time. She looked into his eyes, deeper than he’d allowed before. Their colour was black or dark purple down there, and dense with stars. She felt the immense pull of time and space, of vast incomprehensible knowledge. He’s alone, she thought without really understanding what she meant, and the hairs rose on the nape of her neck. For a moment it seemed as if the beauty and chaos and hideous indifference of the entire universe were spread out before her; or the immutable solitude of a single mind. Then he took a deep breath and blinked, and when he spoke, his voice was thick and crusted.

‘I’ve been raped too,’ he said.

She caught her breath. The bastards. No wonder he kept running. ‘While you were sleeping rough?’

‘No.’

‘One of your foster fathers?’

Jesse passed his hand wearily across his eyes.

‘Or don’t you want to talk about it?’ she asked.

She thought he wasn’t going to answer. The silence stretched between them until it took form, became as tangible as brick or stone: a bridge worth crossing.

‘Someone who was supposed to love me, to protect me,’ he said. ‘My father.’

‘Your father,’ she whispered, shocked.

‘Yeah, my father. He swam with me, taught me to fish. He played chess with me. He told me stories – night after night he told me wonderful tales. He was teaching me to work with wood, to carve. And one night he came to my room. I could smell the drink on him. He hugged me, caressed me. Then he pulled down my pyjamas. He was weeping when he finished. I’d never seen my father weep before.’

‘Jesse,’ she said.

‘What kind of monster abuses his own child?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘I burnt the house down soon after,’ he said. ‘I was nine years old. Nearly ten.’

‘An accident.’

‘No, Sarah, it wasn’t. I meant to do it. I meant to kill him. I dissolved my mother’s sleeping tablets in his beer. Lots of them. Only my mother and grandmother and sister ... I thought I’d be able to get them out in time. I was wrong. It was night, they were sleeping. The fire spread so fast. The heat ... the fumes. They died.’

‘Oh god,’ she said.

‘Now you know. Sometimes I wish the scars would cover my whole body. My face.’

Sarah stroked his hair. She could hear his heart thudding against his chest, feel the flames racing along his veins. His skin was hot against hers. A

sudden insight brought the first prickling of tears she'd felt: for as long as Jesse lived, a part of him would always be nine years old and seared by flames.

'You were just a little kid. He hurt you so much,' she said.

'Yes, but that wasn't the reason.'

She waited.

'I was afraid for Emmy,' he said. He laughed, a bitter rent in the night's fine cloth. 'Me, afraid for her. How ironic. Her big brother. Her saviour. Her murderer.'

They held each other until they both slept.

Chapter 20

For two days Jesse watched Sarah conceal her bruises from the family, but when she gasped as he brushed against her side accidentally, he lost his temper.

'If you won't let Meg have a look at you, then go to a clinic!' he snapped. 'You might have some broken ribs or internal injuries.'

'No,' she said, turning away from him.

'And what if you're pregnant?'

'Wrong time of month. Now back off. I'm OK.'

He grasped her by the arm and swung her round. Again she stifled a cry of pain.

'You are *not* OK. Any idiot can see it. And your parents would too, if they weren't so busy. And mostly if you didn't hide away all of the time. They're going to notice sooner or later, you know.'

Sarah folded her arms across her chest and refused to speak.

'In fact, Meg already has, I reckon. She's been asking some questions.'

'You haven't said anything?' Sarah asked in alarm.

He shook his head. 'I still don't understand why you won't tell them.'

'Finn will murder Mick and his mate.'

'Nonsense. Rapists belong in gaol. He'll go to the police.'

'You don't know him the way I do. After Peter died, he went mad. Literally raving mad for a while. Haven't you ever wondered why there are no photos of Peter in the house? Finn tore up every single one.'

'Then tell Meg. She's a psychiatrist, for god's sake!'

'That makes it worse. You should've seen her play shrink with Peter. I bet if they'd left him alone, he'd be here right now. Or at least alive.'

'Maybe. And maybe you're blaming the wrong people.'

With a sharp intake of breath Sarah reached for her plait and began to twist it round her finger. She turned away from Jesse's unsettling gaze. He'd never understand, she thought. The worst mistake I've made. Maybe I'll ever make. *Damn right, Seesaw*, she could almost hear Peter say. *I wanted help. I wanted to come back.*

Would Jesse be here if Peter had returned?

He'd always been a great one for secrets, Peter had, though it had first become excessive in secondary school, and really excessive after his friendship with Daniel, which her parents hadn't much liked. Especially Finn, and once the questions started up Peter would flatly refuse to divulge where he was going and what he was doing. But even way back when she'd been too little to say her own name, she'd call herself *Sasa*, and it had stuck, and one day Peter had turned it into *Seesaw*. 'Because you're always seesawing about,' he'd said with a sparkle in those brilliant green eyes of his – with his lazy smile – teasing her about her constant skipping and twirling and leaping and dancing. She remembered falling on him with her small furious fists, and his tickling her in revenge. It had been so like Peter

to make it straightaway *our secret*, which came to be part of their own private code.

Would she trade Jesse for Peter if she had the choice?

She shivered, then lay down gingerly on the bed.

'I'm a bit tired,' she said, closing her eyes. Her face was paler than usual.

'You need a doctor,' Jesse repeated helplessly.

He began to pace back and forth before the window, his bare feet making very little noise. Matthew was one matter, but to help Sarah would be to open a Pandora's box about which he was deeply uneasy. Sarah could be treated by any competent GP and would almost certainly heal within weeks, at most a month or two. There was no need to interfere. And he would be putting himself in a position of real vulnerability. He didn't want to be anyone's medicine man, not the Andersens', not even Sarah's.

He was debating with himself whether to speak openly with Finn about Sarah's condition when a soft noise like a kitten's mewling, abruptly cut off as its neck was snapped, made him swing round. Sarah had changed position; she was now lying on her side, legs drawn up and hands gripped between her knees. Her eyes were still shut, her lips thin slashes of bloodless flesh, her brow rigid and puckered. She was breathing shallowly, trying to conceal her pain.

He cursed himself and crossed the room in a few strides. 'I think I can help you if you'll let me.'

She opened her eyes. 'Help me?'

He watched her, not trusting himself to elaborate, until she groped for his hand.

'Do you remember how quickly Nubi's break healed?' he asked.

Without moving, Sarah seemed to sink further into the pillow. She barely nodded, not taking her eyes off his face. He could sense her dismay. The words refused to form on his tongue, however wildly they scrambled through his head.

'Are you telling me you had something to do with it?' she asked at last.

He assented, his face wary.

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. Disconcerted, already regretting his impulse, Jesse reached out to remove a strand of hair from the corner of her mouth. Only then did she let go of his other hand and turn her head aside so that her voice, when she spoke, was muffled by the pillow.

'I hate this,' she said.

Jesse lowered himself to the bed. He rubbed his hands along his jeans, listening to the swishing sound until his palms became uncomfortably warm, then squeezed them together as if flattening something – a ball of raw unpalatable dough, perhaps.

'Never mind,' he said. 'Forget I mentioned it.'

'Is that your solution to everything?'

'I get carried away sometimes.'

'No,' she said, suddenly furious. She whipped round and raised herself on an elbow. 'You *run* away.'

'Sarah –'

Her cheeks were wet with fresh tears. Jesse was surprised that they didn't scald her face, so angry was she.

'If you don't want my help, just say so,' Jesse said.

'Who said I didn't want your help? It's your hiding everything I can't take.'

They stared at each other till Jesse gestured lamely and dropped his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he said, not entirely sure what he was apologising for.

'I'm not afraid of what you are, Jesse.'

'Then why are you crying?'

'You idiot, I'm crying because you keep turning each of those weird and wonderful and impossible things you're able to do into a stone – a huge heavy stone you add, one by one, to the wall between us. All I want is to walk on the same side as you, but how can I? You won't *let* me.'

'I can't.'

'Didn't it ever occur to you that it might be easier if you shared this stuff with someone?'

Jesse gazed at his hands, his throat tight and closed, his face shuttered.

Sarah waited till the silence became as incontrovertible as DNA evidence in a court case. Then she dug her fists into her eyes, the way Emmy used to, sniffed, and wiped her face with the duvet. Jesse handed her a tissue, which she accepted, though not his help to sit up. She preferred to grimace, hold her ribs, and stubbornly work her way into an upright position, her pillow jammed behind her lower back. Jesse watched her gather her dignity about her shoulders like a prayer shawl, and struggled with his own tumult of anger, and bitterness, and longing.

'All right,' she said. 'Don't talk to me, if you won't. Just get on with it. My chest hurts.' Her tone now matter-of-fact, 'What do you want me to do?'

'Relax, that's all. Don't fight me.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'Forget about me.'

The open window drew Sarah's gaze. For a moment she scented the wind whipping across the prow of a longboat, took strength from the vast sweep of the sea, the dazzling blue of the sky, free of cloud. 'You really don't know me yet, do you?' Her Viking blood flushed her cheeks; her smile, shaky at first, reached her eyes. 'If you did, you'd understand the reason why I'm a good dancer. Lots and lots of people have talent. But I practise till my feet bleed, if I must. I never give up. Never.'

Sarah had a hairline crack in her breastbone and considerable bruising, but no serious internal injuries. Jesse ate his way through several bars of chocolate – Sarah always kept a stash in her room now – while he returned gradually to realtime.

Afterwards Sarah fell into a healthy slumber and dreamt of the icy fjord waters and limitless sky and tracts of pine forest near her grandmother's home. Somebody was felling trees in the distance, and she could smell the heady resinous bite to the air as she and Peter chased each other, laughing, into a subjunctive future.

Chapter 21

'I need some exercise,' Finn said, laying down his trumpet. 'A walk, Jesse?'

'We could go for a run along the river, if you want to work up a sweat,' Jesse said.

'After eating?' asked Finn in horror.

Sarah moved a piece. 'Check,' she said, a bit smugly. Jesse was teaching her to play.

Jesse shook his head without glancing at the board. 'Have another look. I'll let you replay the move, since it's your first game. But only this time.' He rose and stretched luxuriously, turned to Finn. 'Let's do the washing up, then I'll go with you.' A fleeting frown. Carefully offhand he asked Sarah, 'OK with you?'

Sarah bit her lip and stared down at the game. And continued to stare till the silence threatened to attract Finn's attention. 'What about our game?' she finally asked.

'Have you moved?'

Sarah indicated the board. 'Better?'

'Leave it set up and we'll go over it later. Mate in three moves.'

Sarah scowled at the chessmen.

'Don't let it discourage you, Sarah,' Finn said. 'I've been playing for years, and I haven't got the better of him yet. He's competition standard.'

'And you're bothering to play with *me*.' When Jesse flashed his quirky smile, she added, 'Aren't there more rules? I thought chess was like maths, impossibly complicated.'

'Give it a few more games,' Jesse said. 'Simplicity is the most complex of all.'

'You're a good influence on her,' Finn said. 'She's always refused to go anywhere near the game.' Finn winked, and Jesse looked away, reddening, while Sarah glared at her father.

Finn's refusal to take Nubi had seemed odd; now his purposeful stride aroused Jesse's suspicions even further. The late afternoon sun was still strong, the sky clear and bright. Jesse could feel residual midday heat radiating from the pavement. He had no trouble keeping up with Finn, despite the gruelling pace the older man set. When they came to an unobtrusive dark blue Vauxhall, parked before a row of small shops, Jesse wiped his brow and eyed Finn speculatively.

'Where are we going?' Jesse asked.

'Get in,' Finn said, opening the rear door and nodding to the driver. 'Let it be a surprise.'

Half an hour later, they drew up at a small airfield just outside the city limits. Finn dismissed the driver and led Jesse towards a small squat

structure set off a distance from the central cluster of hangars, buildings, and control tower.

‘Ever been in a helicopter?’ Finn asked.

‘No,’ Jesse replied. ‘Not even a plane.’ But he was certain that the half-dozen models perched on the tarmac like sleek metallic dragonflies were fully as up-to-date and powerful as they looked.

‘Wait here,’ Finn said, and went into the building.

He was gone for perhaps ten minutes. He returned with two bottles of mineral water and accompanied by a man wearing mirrored sunglasses and carrying a slim black briefcase and clipboard. Finn performed the introductions. Smile and handshake perfunctory, the pilot barely glanced at Jesse, who drank while the two men exchanged a few words in a foreign language – Dutch or Afrikaans, maybe. Not German.

‘You can board,’ the pilot said in English, indicating the nearest aircraft. ‘I’ve already preflighted.’

Finn and Jesse clambered into the helicopter, a CEO’s silver and white perk with navy racing stripes. It seated four, and Finn chose to ride next to Jesse in the rear of the cockpit. As they fastened their seatbelts, Jesse thought how small the interior was. The white leather seats were well padded and comfortable, elegant even, but they were sandwiched between the back wall, the pilot’s seat, and the bubble windows. It felt like a child’s toy. Was this thing really going to fly?

The pilot walked slowly around the helicopter, giving it an exterior checkover. He crouched and fiddled with a skid, then examined the tail rotor. One of the ground crew approached, and they spoke for a short while. Finally the pilot was satisfied, and he boarded. Before proceeding with his prestart checklist, he issued a few terse safety instructions – not that Jesse had any intention of opening the door mid-flight. The engine whined as the pilot paced it through its RPMs.

The helicopter lifted off, hovered while the pilot asked for clearance, and finally ascended. It was noisy, but not as noisy as Jesse had expected from the war films he’d seen. Within a short time they’d soared away from the airfield and were heading north, cutting across the satiny greygreen ribbon of the river, then veering westward so that it soon disappeared from sight. Jesse had never been in an airborne machine before, but his nervousness soon faded, and he began to enjoy watching the countryside unfold beneath his gaze. The pilot must have realised that Jesse was a novice flier, for as they approached a herd of cattle grazing somnolently, he swooped down close enough to ruffle the grass and their hides. Suddenly. Steeply. Jesse’s stomach plummeted. This was nothing like birdflight. The steer eyed the intruder with a bored and weary skepticism, not at all anxious to yield their ground. Jesse wondered if this was some sort of routine manoeuvre, so unmoved were the animals. The pilot glanced back at Jesse with a smile and a thumbs-up gesture. He hovered briefly over the spot, the lengthening shadow of the helicopter clearly visible below them, then climbed and resumed their flight.

After about forty minutes they touched down in a grassy area near a secluded stone farmhouse. The pilot was skilled, or it was easier to steer the craft than Jesse imagined, for they landed without the slightest shudder or

jolt. Jesse could see nothing to distinguish the dwelling from ones they had already overflown. This part of the county was thinly settled, and a number of roads looked unpaved.

Finn and the pilot conversed in low tones as the rotors came to a halt, then the pilot swung open the door and sprang out. Finn and Jesse followed. The pilot headed off in the direction of an outbuilding, while Finn took Jesse's arm and steered him towards the farmhouse. The property was heavily wooded, the shadows long, dense, and still. And yet Jesse felt sure that the dwelling wasn't deserted, that they were even this moment being observed.

'Now are you going to tell me what this about?' Jesse asked, only a little aggrieved because the pleasure of the helicopter flight still buoyed his mood.

Finn didn't appear to hear him.

As they entered the building Thor himself couldn't have struck a greater thunderbolt.

The interior of the farmhouse had been gutted and replaced with an electronic world as strange as anything Jesse had seen on the screen. Stranger, for being real. He suddenly knew how a stone-age shaman might feel if catapulted into the NASA mission control centre; or he himself, upon traversing a portal into another time, another universe.

'Where are we?' he asked, his voice hushed.

'There's someone who wants to meet you,' Finn answered elliptically. 'Don't worry, you know I won't let you come to any harm.'

They walked along a short corridor lined with a pearly material both translucent and reflective. A new kind of plastic? Jesse asked himself. No light fixtures were visible, but the passage was well lit with a cool, faintly bluish light. He heard no footsteps as they proceeded and in fact had the feeling that sound was being muffled in some way. At the end of the corridor they entered an airlock – at least, that was the only word Jesse could put to the device. When the doors closed on them, he realised that they might be in a lift, though he had no sensation of movement. The light changed abruptly to a deep purple, then faded again. Finn stepped up to a small panel in the wall and said something incomprehensible. The door opened in front of them, and they exited.

They stood on the threshold of a large room lined from floor to ceiling with what could only be bank upon bank of advanced electronic equipment. A woman in a perfectly normal pair of jeans and T-shirt was waiting for them. Tall and slender, she bore her decorative facial scars with pride. Jesse had never seen skin any darker.

'Finn, it's been a while,' she said. Her English was perfect, unaccented.

'Ayen, the pleasure is mine.'

'And this is Jesse?' she asked.

Finn nodded.

'OK, enough's enough,' Jesse said. 'Will someone please explain what's going on?'

'You haven't told him?' Ayen asked.

'No, I thought he should have no preconceptions.'

'Hello,' Jesse said defiantly, 'I'm right here.'

Ayen smiled. 'Are you hungry? Thirsty? Some sandwiches or biscuits? A coke, perhaps?'

The strangeness was beginning to wear off, and trepidation was not truly in Jesse's nature. 'No, thank you. I don't want a drink, but an explanation.'

Ayen gestured towards some chairs grouped round a low table. 'Let's sit down, and I'll tell you about what we're doing here.'

They took seats, and Jesse was relieved that the chairs didn't perform any tricks like changing height or shape to accommodate him. Or speaking in tongues.

'This facility is part of an international organisation,' Ayen began straightaway, 'answerable to no specific government. We have a range of different projects that needn't concern you. Finn has brought you to our attention because of your unusual abilities.'

'What abilities?' Jesse asked.

'Fire-starting, for one. We thought it might be interesting to run some tests.'

'You told them about me? Without asking?' Jesse addressed Finn hotly. 'You had no right!'

'I'm concerned about you,' Finn replied.

'About yourselves, more likely.'

'Tell him,' Ayen said.

'Tell me what?' Jesse asked.

Finn looked at him for a long while before answering. Finally he sighed. 'You've told me about the fire that killed your family.'

'And?' Jesse's voice was loud and angry.

'And that no one survived the fire.'

'How can you possibly think I need reminding? Get to the point.'

'Jesse, *no one* survived the fire. We've checked the records. Not a single member of the household. Not even the boy.'

Jesse stared at Finn, the colour draining from his face as he took in the import of Finn's words.

'That's impossible. There must be some mistake,' Jesse said.

'Not unless you gave us false information.'

'I'm no liar!'

Ayen interposed in a tranquil tone. 'There's no error. We've seen copies of the coroner's report, the police records, the death certificates. All records of Jesse Wright end with the fire – school, health, even church. Nor has social services ever heard of you.'

'But –' Jesse didn't know how to finish his question. 'But I remember – the hospital, the funeral, the foster families, school. And my back – the burn scars on my back.'

'Think about it rationally,' Ayen said. 'If you'd been in hospital with severe burns, you could never possibly have attended a funeral. That's an anomaly right there.'

'All my memories ... *all* of them ...' Liam ...

'Memory is a very interesting phenomenon,' Ayen said.

Jesse closed his eyes. Rain like fine soft ashes. Late afternoon. Treetops grey-fingered and duskly swaying. They're lowering the casket. His back is screaming.

‘Jesse?’ Finn asked gently, reaching out with a hand. Jesse tore his arm away. His skin was clammy, and he could smell his own sweat. What did they want with him? Wasn’t it enough that everything had been taken from him? Did they want to take his memories, his past as well?

Jesse’s voice shook. ‘If I’m not Jesse, then who am I?’

‘That’s what we hope to find out,’ Ayen said.

‘Why? What’s in it for you?’

Ayen’s smile was professional – Jesse had seen it too often not to recognise it. ‘We can help you.’

‘Yeah? Why should you care?’

‘I care,’ Finn said. ‘Meg, Sarah, and I care.’

‘So you can be sure you don’t have a – a what? An impostor, a delinquent – or worse – in your midst? A madman?’

‘We know that already,’ Finn said. ‘Whoever – whatever – you are, you’re not insane. Or twisted. Far from it.’

Jesse was silent for a moment. He would have liked a cigarette but was certain there’d be no smoking in this place.

‘Who are you?’ Jesse asked. ‘A policeman of some kind?’

‘Not exactly, but it will do to go on with,’ Finn said.

‘How do I know I can trust you?’

Finn leaned forward in his chair. ‘Look at me, directly at me, and ask me again.’

Jesse didn’t raise his eyes. Sarah was right. He was tired of running.

Ayen waited until Jesse nodded, stiffly as though he’d been sleeping rough again.

‘Will you tell me about what else you’re able to do?’ Ayen asked.

‘You still haven’t told me exactly what’s going on here.’ Jesse waved a hand at the array of equipment.

‘Research,’ Ayen said.

‘Into what?’

Finn and Ayen exchanged glances. This time it was Finn who nodded. A multilingual photographer who travelled extensively, Jesse thought, with a firearm. But what else? Jesse wondered if he’d ever know.

‘Artificial intelligence,’ Ayen said.

In the end, Jesse was curious enough to let them run their tests. Ayen seated him at a console surrounded by a clear shield much like the helicopter’s bubble window, within which fine, coloured patterns, possibly wires or circuits, were embedded. The shield surrounded his upper body completely without blocking external sound or other sensory input. He could move his hands freely while operating the computer terminal. A dark green monitor as large as a pool table stretched above him from eye-level. There was no keyboard, however, and he found out why as soon as the game began.

The computer responded directly to the movements of his hands and eyes, to his voice. And more. After a moment of sensory disorientation Jesse finds himself inside a small chamber whose walls are elastic, like the pulsating membrane of an amniotic sac. A voice speaks to him, sounding

familiar. A woman's voice. She tells him that his first task is to escape from the room. She asks him what he'll need, she'd furnish it. He reflects for a moment – why not his knife? She chuckles, and he realises that it's his grandmother speaking. She walks up to him, barefoot in her faded twill trousers, toenails thickened and yellow, hands dirt-caked from gardening, and places the knife in his hand. Use it well, she tells him. She smiles and turns to leave. Don't go, he cries. I'm always with you, she says.

Then he's alone inside the room. For a moment he closes his eyes. The air is cool and tangy with woodsmoke, an autumn afternoon, someone burning leaves. Voices whisper sounds and sweet airs. *These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air ...* He lays the blade against his wrist – is this the escape key? There's always a way to abort the program.

A strong scent of lavender. He shivers and drops his arm. Carefully, he examines his surroundings. Still no exit, the only way out through the wall. He approaches it reluctantly. He doesn't like the way it quivers. Only a computer simulation, he reminds himself. Raising his knife, he takes a deep breath and plunges it into the fleshy surface. Blood spurts at him, and he gasps, steps back, drops the knife, screams.

Finn helped Jesse up from the seat. His knife lay on the floor, and his hands were splattered with blood. He was too stunned to speak. Finn accompanied him to a small lavatory where he washed his hands and face. Upon their return Ayen was on her hands and knees wiping the floor with a cloth, the water in the bucket pink. She'd placed his knife on the table, and it too had been wiped clean. A few small vials, obviously for testing. Jesse allowed himself to be propelled into a chair. He sat quietly, trying to gather his thoughts, trying not to shiver. Ayen left and after a while came back with a tray of tea and some biscuits, and a clean T-shirt. She'd discarded the disposable gloves.

'Take some sugar,' she said. 'You need the energy.'

Jesse drank one cup, then a second.

'What was that?' he asked, by now composed enough to pose some questions.

'A prototype of what we think may be the next generation of computers,' Ayen said. 'Well, if not the next, then somewhere not far down the line.'

'But how –' Jesse stopped to rephrase his question. 'The computer didn't just respond to verbal input. It culled my memory.' He glanced at Finn. 'My memory,' he repeated bitterly. 'How could a machine do that? How could anything do that?'

'That's one of the things we ourselves don't quite understand,' Ayen said. 'The mathematics is extraordinarily complex, and only a very few people, highly unusual people, are involved in writing the software, which along with the hardware is still in the developmental stage – if hardware is the right term.'

'What do you mean?'

'The prototype is a hybrid system comprising traditional, if very advanced, electronics side by side with chips that our bio-engineers have designed. The basic chip is carbon rather than silicon-based. A biological chip of organic molecules. It's grown rather than manufactured.'

Jesse stared at her. 'You mean the computer is alive?'

'It depends on how you define alive,' she answered.

'And it reads minds?'

'I wouldn't put it like that but, yes, in some cases, where the individual is particularly sensitive.'

'Sensitive to what?'

'In all cultures there have been people who can stretch the bonds of space and time, who can perceive beyond the normal limits of everyday experience.'

'You're talking about mystics, shamans. That stuff isn't real,' Jesse said, conscious of how ridiculous the protest sounded, coming from him. At least they didn't know about the healing.

'Isn't it?' Ayen asked.

They both looked at the knife lying in front of them on the table.

'It's a trick.' Jesse turned to Finn. 'It must be. You brought it with you for god-only-knows what reason. I have no idea what you think I am or can do, but I'm no magician.'

'One person's magic is another's logic,' Ayen said. 'Have you ever seen the emaciated body of someone who has been instructed – *unbeknownst to himself* – to stop eating?'

Jesse shook his head, his eyes on the knife.

'You Europeans,' Ayen said. 'That's going to be *our* contribution – unifying science and the sacred.' Though uttered with a smile, there was an edge to her words which reminded Jesse of certain schoolyard confrontations.

'Look, Jesse, we all know research often yields unexpected results. And any ten-year-old can give you a list of accidents that became fabulous discoveries,' Finn interjected adroitly. 'No one expected this to happen, and no one really understands why, or how. I certainly don't pretend to.' He grinned. 'I'm just a lowly photographer.'

'Then why are you involved?'

'I'm not, or only indirectly. When I saw what you could do with fire, I did a little checking on my end, got in touch with a few experts. Hence Ayen and her people. She requested an interview.'

'Requested is good. I don't recall anyone asking me.'

'Would you have come? Would you have believed me if you hadn't seen this place?' Finn asked reasonably enough. 'This computer?'

Jesse picked up the knife. He ran his fingers over the blade, examined the handle, and finally balanced its length across the palm of his hand, hefting it a little to test its weight. If it wasn't his, it was a perfect replica.

By all rights, Finn should have reported him to the police as soon as he found out about the discrepancies in Jesse's story, or at least thrown him out of the house.

'You really didn't bring my knife?' Jesse asked Finn.

'I didn't even know you owned one.'

'Jesse, no one wants to trick you,' Ayen said. 'What purpose would that serve? The knife is as much a surprise to me as to you.'

'Then explain how it got here.'

'I can't, other than to assume, as a working hypothesis, that you were able to reproduce it, or fetch your own knife here.'

'Fetch? As in teleport?'

'I wouldn't like to put a name to the phenomenon just yet.' She smiled. 'Quantum physicists – I'm not one – tell me that there are going to be some very interesting developments in the next twenty years.'

'Quantum physics is often misunderstood,' Jesse said. 'It's used as proof of subjectivity by lay people with a taste for mysticism. They'd like to believe that consciousness creates reality. People who have no clue about processes like superposition, decoherence, and entanglement.'

Ayen laughed. 'I'll let you loose on our physicists later on. You won't find a mystic among them, I promise you.'

Jesse waved his knife in the direction of the computer console.

'What did you see on the monitor?' he asked.

'Nothing,' Finn said. 'It remained blank.'

'Why? Wasn't it switched on?'

'It's a little more complicated than that,' Ayen said.

Jesse frowned. He was beginning to want a cigarette rather badly. Instead, he leaned back and gnawed on the handle of the knife. When nobody contributed an explanation, he spit out a question.

'Yeah? More complicated than mind-reading? Or materialising objects?'

'The monitor doesn't always respond,' Ayen said. 'And on occasion it shuts down. At first we thought it was a hardware problem, but now it's beginning to look like a programming glitch. One of the things we need to deal with.'

'No pattern you can find?'

'None that we can detect. Entirely random.' Ayen stressed the word *random* with a faint musical inflection, the first hint that English wasn't her mother tongue.

'All right. What else can it do?'

'The prototype?' Ayen said. 'Everyone who's been able to communicate with the computer – and thus far there haven't been many – reports a similar experience – an intelligence that can access at least some portion of one's memory.'

'Anything else like the knife?' Jesse asked.

'No. You're the first person to produce a physical manifestation – the blood, the knife.' Ayen glanced at the console. 'This is no longer a question of virtual reality,' she added, leaning forward. 'You have to let us try to find out what's happening. We may be on the verge of an incredible breakthrough.'

'There are things it might be better not to unleash.'

'Every age has had its fearmongers, telling us not to explore, not to extend our knowledge. The earth is flat. People aren't made to fly. Genetic manipulation is contrary to God's will. I know all the arguments, have heard them a thousand times since childhood. Not all of my family supported my interest in science.'

'And you're not afraid?'

'It's never been possible to predict the long-term effects of our endeavours. Do you think the first person to poke a stick through the hole in

that odd round flat stone could ever have imagined a car? Or whoever roasted the prehistoric haunch of meat over a fire, the power of a jet engine?’

‘Or a nuclear weapon,’ Jesse said.

‘I won’t deny there’s always the risk of misuse. But an interaction between a mind like yours and our computer could only be fruitful for both sides. Just think of what might be possible.’ Ayen’s voice remained perfectly even, but her dark eyes brightened like a stained glass window suddenly backlit by the sun.

Finn poured himself another cup of tea, then pushed his chair backwards a couple of centimetres and crossed his legs. He reached for a biscuit, bit off a piece, and wrinkled his nose. ‘Stale,’ he said, tossing it down.

Jesse felt some of the tension leave his neck and shoulders, his jaw. No, Finn wouldn’t let Ayen have it all her way. But she would try. It hadn’t escaped him that she’d deftly sidestepped his question about further capabilities of the computer. Jesse could see the headlines: *Nobel Prize Awarded to Sudanese Neuroscientist. Science Cracks the Crystal Ball*. If she were a neuroscientist. Perhaps he was being unfair, but he didn’t quite trust secret installations. And he didn’t care what anybody told him: this place reeked of power and money and a military agenda.

‘What do you want to do with me?’ Jesse asked.

‘First of all, a few simple diagnostic tests: a routine physical – bloodwork, urine, major organs, that sort of thing; then cranial CT scan, EEG, MRI. Nothing alarming, nothing invasive. We want to do some baseline mapping. Then the standard psychological tests: IQ, creativity, ESP. Possibly some disorder screening.’

‘ESP?’

‘Well, yes, they’re not exactly accepted by the scientific community, but they might point us in a useful direction. After that, we can move on to some tests of our own devising.’

‘You want to do all of this right now?’

Ayen smiled. ‘Hardly. We’ll start with one or two of the physical tests today, the rest in stages.’

‘And then?’

‘More work with the prototype.’ She grinned. ‘Some of the lads have nicknamed it HAL. After Clarke’s –’

‘I know who HAL is,’ Jesse said. ‘Not exactly reassuring, wouldn’t you say?’

He looked over at the computer. It was quiescent – outwardly. But so was a volcano until eruption, or a star about to nova. He wouldn’t mind a few harmless tests – perhaps he’d learn something about his own memory – but there was no way he’d have anything more to do with that digital monster over there. Let them find some other ape to take the next evolutionary leap for them.

And yet, whispered something in his mind, imagine ... Ayen and her lot would never have to know.

‘What is your part in all of this?’ he asked Ayen.

‘I’m a neurophysicist, among other things. And a medical doctor, so you needn’t worry about that side,’ Ayen said.

'Who will conduct the tests? You're not working alone here, are you?' Jesse asked.

'Of course not. You'll meet some of the technicians in a little while. And after the routine tests, perhaps some of the scientists and researchers.' She laughed, a throaty sound. 'One software type would trade his mother and his girlfriend and his future progeny – plus the organ to produce them, I daresay – for a shot at you.'

'I only trade in souls.'

Her eyes glinted. 'It won't come to that.' Then she made a dismissive gesture with her hand. 'Stop fretting. There's nothing satanic about research.'

'What if I refuse?'

Finn spoke up. 'It's entirely up to you, Jesse. There's going to be no coercion.'

'Can I withdraw at any point?'

'The tests are costly and time-consuming,' Ayen said, 'so it would be better if you –'

'Any time you wish,' Finn intervened smoothly. 'Nobody will hold it against you.' He paused for a moment before continuing, 'Nor will it affect your relationship with my family.'

'Even if you don't know who I am?'

'We know enough. I'm not denying there may be some issues with the authorities, but I'm confident that Meg and I can handle them, ultimately.'

'Aren't you frightened of me?'

'Your past doesn't scare me. Whatever it might be.'

'Not the past.' Jesse dropped the knife onto the table with a loud clunk, the sound of schoolyard challenge, of pick-it-up-smartboy-it's-time-to-see-who's-got-balls.

But Finn wasn't a schoolboy. And he'd learned long ago which games to play, which to disdain.

'Of course I'm frightened. I'm bloody terrified! If you or Sarah or Meg had cancer, I'd be just as terrified. Do you think that I'd walk away from you then?'

Jesse fell silent and stared at his hands.

At their front door Finn remarked that he'd be away for a week, possibly ten days. He had an assignment in Vietnam.

Jesse raised his eyebrows. 'Taking your camera?' he asked a little too innocently.

'Let's go down to my office,' Finn said. 'I don't suppose you feel like sleeping.'

While Finn made coffee, Jesse sat quietly with his head bowed. Finn felt a rush of tenderness at the sight of the thinly-disguised tendons, the shag of hair, the bony knobs of vertebrae. A child harshly used, a boy on the verge of manhood: what did it matter whose fingerprints he wore? His ravaged skin costumed a soul long flayed into retreat, and now just beginning to emerge. There was something wild and fierce and uncompromising in his spirit; something ancient, and imperious. Finn wondered, not for the first time,

whether Jesse had Scandinavian ancestry – he had the colouring for it. Jesse would make a beautiful fiery dragon of a man someday. Finn resolved not to abandon him – especially now – before the metamorphosis was complete.

Finn placed his hands on either side of Jesse's neck and gently massaged the tight muscles. At first Jesse tensed at the touch, his armour snapping into place along his shoulderblades, then bit by bit retracting as Finn's strong thumbs travelled the ridges of his spine, the fissures and ropy pahoe-hoes of his flesh. Finn was patient, his fingers coaxing. Jesse relaxed and even let Finn reach beneath his T-shirt. Finn didn't wonder at the knots and stiffness in Jesse's back after such a day. He increased the pressure of his hands in increments, finding the tsubos that he'd learnt about in the East. The scar tissue softened and swelled under Finn's fingertips like bread dough – yeasty, well kneaded, and rising in a warm corner.

When Finn's hands tired, he rested them on Jesse's shoulders. He tried to think of something to say, something that would reassure both of them. In the end it was Jesse who spoke.

'Who am I, Finn?'

Finn moved round to face Jesse, then perched on the edge of his desk. 'I've been wanting to show you something. A photograph.'

When Jesse nodded, Finn picked up a folder and extracted a dog-eared print which he'd been keeping for the right moment. Jesse glanced at it, unable to understand what Finn found interesting. It was a shot of Meg and Sarah sitting at the garden table among the remains of a meal. A nice family photo, vivid and natural, but nothing special. Then he looked closer. There was a vague outline of a third figure to their left – not blurred precisely, but more like an afterimage through which the lavender and rose bushes could be clearly seen.

'Do you remember when I took some photographs at supper in order to fill up the roll?' Finn asked. 'They're all the same.'

Jesse examined it carefully. He tapped the shadowy figure with a finger. 'You mean that's me?'

'Yes.'

'I don't understand. What went wrong?'

'I did my best. You're not very photogenic.'

Jesse frowned at the photograph. 'Some kind of mistake in developing?'

'Impossible.' Finn said. 'Not like this.'

'Then what?'

Finn shrugged. 'I've no explanation, at least none that you'd like.'

Jesse thrust the sheet back at Finn.

'Then you think I should go on with the tests?' Jesse asked.

'Have you got a better idea?'

Chapter 22

A day later Jesse came into the sitting room to find Finn hanging up a set of photographs mounted behind glass.

'They're of Peter,' Finn explained. 'I thought it's time to display some again.'

'Sarah said you'd destroyed all the photos.'

'Prints, but not the negatives. I may have been sectionable but not quite *that* out of my mind.'

In the photo Jesse found most riveting, a thin angular-looking boy with brilliant green eyes and red hair a fraction lighter than Meg's was seated on the rim of the Andersen sundial, a large sketchbook across his lap. He was smiling directly into the camera. Even on paper his skin glowed, warm and golden. About sixteen, he looked utterly at ease with the world. He looked clever. He looked as though he laughed a lot but knew how to listen. He looked the sort of person you'd like for a friend. For a boyfriend; he was beautiful – as beautiful as Liam.

Finn interrupted Jesse's reverie. 'When I get back from overseas, we're going to have to sit down and talk about some things.'

'Like?'

'Like school.'

'Whatever for?'

Finn gave him one of his Viking looks till Jesse felt himself begin to squirm. 'Yeah well,' he retorted, 'I didn't know they registered pupils anonymously.' In response Finn merely raised an eyebrow and returned to his picture hooks.

That evening Finn left on his trip, and the next few days passed quietly. On Tuesday Jesse worked with Matthew on the longboat for the afternoon, and on Wednesday, having borrowed Finn's card, made a quick trip to the library for some new reading matter (sneaking in a book about men who rape, and another about the treatment of sexual trauma). Otherwise, aside from short walks with Nubi, he kept close to the house. He couldn't persuade Sarah to accompany him anywhere.

For hours at a time she would lie on Jesse's floor with a book or Peter's top. They played chess. Often Jesse would look up to find her eyes resting on him. When her hands clenched, he prised them open and rubbed her palms until the gouge marks faded. But she didn't cry. Her bruises were slowly fading, and would leave no external traces of her ordeal.

There were nightmares. Ever since that first night, Jesse had gone unasked to her room and sat with her until she drifted into a fitful sleep. Sometimes he read aloud to her, his beloved Shakespeare; sometimes he made up extravagant adventures of heroines and dragons and bold quests; and sometimes he said nothing at all. Although he knew he could share the bed, he slept on the floor. Meg didn't intervene, nor did she mention the purple shadows gathering under Sarah's eyes. Only once did Sarah venture

as far as the garden, and that for less than ten minutes. She spent a lot of time dusting and polishing and Hoovering – even their weekly cleaner made a tart comment. And the water bill would be enormous, if Sarah continued to shower so long and so frequently.

On Friday Meg had a day off. Jesse and Sarah did the washing up together, while Meg went to check her email and make a phone call. Once they'd finished, Jesse headed for the garden to smoke, and Sarah trudged upstairs to get ready. Meg had been uncharacteristically adamant that Sarah accompany her on a visit to her mother, a longish trip by car. 'Gran's very upset that you haven't been to see her in months.' After a protracted and prickly argument Sarah had acquiesced, though not with good grace. Meg's mother lived in the country, in a small cottage surrounded by geese and flowers. 'My mother has a passion for sunflowers,' she'd said to Jesse. 'She talks to them all the time.' She'd laughed when asked if they replied, but Jesse had not been joking. Perhaps Meg's gifts ran in the family.

Meg and Sarah set out within twenty minutes and would not return till evening; they were taking Nubi with them for a good romp in the adjoining meadow. Jesse planned to check out some secondhand bookshops, walk along the river, work a few hours at the boathouse. And it was time for him to pay Mick a visit.

Sarah had given Jesse Mick's address unwillingly, but she'd given it to him. 'What can you possibly hope to accomplish?' she'd asked. He'd shrugged without replying. Her eyes had studied him worriedly. 'Maybe you should take Nubi with you,' she'd finally said. 'Mick's vile, but Gavin's dangerous. Psycho kind of dangerous. He might be there.' It was the only conversation they'd had about Mick all week. Jesse had declined, the dog would only hinder him.

After Meg and Sarah had gone, Jesse went upstairs to make his bed and collect his rucksack, along with a few things he'd need – swimming trunks and a towel, a couple of books, his water bottle. And his knife, which he'd refused to leave with Ayen despite her desire to have it tested.

Jesse bent to shake out his duvet. This time a heavysset man with dark curly hair is standing in the corner of the room, a small plastic tub and syringe in his hand. He approaches the lad lying facedown on the bed, arms wrapped protectively over his head, who begins to shudder as the man slides a hand between the emaciated buttocks.

Help me. Please help me.

'How?' Jesse cried. 'Tell me how I can help you.'

At his plea the figures disappeared. It took a few minutes for Jesse's breathing to return to normal.

Back in the kitchen he set about packing himself a picnic lunch. He filled his water bottle and added two cans of coke from the fridge. He made a stack of cheese-and-mustard sandwiches, then rummaged in the cupboards for a packet of crisps and some biscuits. Finn enjoyed having someone around who shared his love of eating and was always bringing home 'just a little something I discovered' to urge on Jesse. 'You're going to make him fat,' Sarah had protested the last time Finn unloaded the car. 'And what's wrong

with fat?’ Finn had teased, digging his fingers into the surplus at his waist and brandishing it with a grin.

Jesse drank a glass of milk while he considered what else to take: the roll of heavy-duty duct tape Finn kept in a drawer, also a length of rope. A blindfold? No, let Mick see and sweat. Absentmindedly Jesse ate one, then another of the biscuits from the open packet. He poured a second glass of milk. He wasn’t keen to confront Mick, because he knew what the only feasible deterrent would have to be.

The scene at Siggy’s kept intruding, and Mick’s music. How could someone who plays like that be a rapist? Jesse couldn’t get his mind around it, no matter how hard he tried. Perhaps he was being naïve, but he felt something like despair that art and inequity could coexist. It was like discovering that Hitler had secretly written *The Tin Drum* or Jack the Ripper, the symphonies of Brahms.

He rinsed out his glass under the tap, then with a last biscuit in hand, stepped out into the garden. The sun was already wicked. Jesse brought a hand up to shade his eyes and watched a butterfly alight on a buddleia shrub with pale lilac blossoms, similar to the one in his family’s garden. He remembered his surprise at how vigorously it regenerated from the hard pruning his grandmother would give it in spring. ‘The earth thrives on strong measures,’ his grandmother had told him only a few weeks before her death. ‘When I was a little girl, farmers used to burn their fields after the harvest. Fire renews the land.’ He could recall her exact words ... her *exact* words. For a while he thought about what Ayen had said about memory.

Then his mind returned to the problem of Mick and Gavin. If there were only another way. He hadn’t fought in a long time; he’d always tried to avoid overt confrontations. Even the hot shame of humiliation was better than losing control. It wasn’t a beating he was afraid of, like other kids who cowered and sucked up and handed over their sweets, their money, their music, their self-respect. And he’d closed his ears to the taunts long ago. (Or had he? a small voice whispered.) Let them think he was scared to death, pissing his pants. Once in the school canteen he’d been cornered by a bunch of kids who’d taken turns spitting into a glass, then added a splash of orange squash and ordered him to drink it down. He hadn’t argued, just done as they’d told him. Afterwards he’d stood as still as stone, eyes downcast. He hadn’t dared to look them in the eye, terrified he’d explode. The story had circulated for weeks, while within the safety of his imagination he’d gleefully pictured them as blackened skeletons. Even now, years later, he sometimes revisited that very satisfying scenario – one of the few images of a fire’s aftermath he could tolerate. And the best part of his draconian pleasure was the secret knowledge, lovingly hoarded, that he could easily have done just that to them.

Only now he suspected his fear of using his gifts had compromised him in ways that he was just beginning to understand. Only now, his fear was even greater, for his gifts might be all that had ever been.

After locking the back door and latching the kitchen window, Jesse slipped his knife from its leather sheath and tested its edge. With a steel that he

found in one of the drawers he honed the blade till sharp and deadly, all fifteen centimetres of it. Then he ran his thumb along the worn leather handle capped in brass, stopping for a moment at the triangular nick. Nobody had been able to tell him how it had been made.

Jesse stared at the knife for a long time. The memories were as real as the knife itself, they had to be.

It was his grandfather's hunting knife. Jesse kept it hidden in the hollow of an old ash tree, wrapped in a piece of oilskin – one of the many secrets he shared with his grandmother, who had given it to him on his seventh birthday. 'A boy needs a knife,' she said with the usual gleam in her eye. 'Your grandfather wanted you to have it. But don't show it to your mother, not just yet.'

Jesse dropped the knife with an oath. Looking down, he saw that he'd opened the fleshy ball of his hand. Blood was welling from the cut. He swallowed the bitter contents of his stomach, glad to have to deal with something as mundane as a cut.

Jesse stanchd the bleeding with wadded kitchen paper. Clenching his fingers tightly around the compress, he searched in the drawers until he found the roll of plasters Meg kept for minor accidents. While he bandaged his hand, he tried not to let his mind wander. He was afraid of where it might go. Mick, concentrate on Mick, he told himself sternly. Deal with him first.

He picked up his knife, sheathed it, and carried it up to his room, where he stowed it safely under his mattress. 'Learn to use it well and wisely,' his grandmother had said.

Mick opened the door himself. He gaped at Jesse, then recovered his sangfroid. His smile was wide and nasty and provocative, the kind a black widow might give to her mate before springing. If uneasy or alarmed, he hid it well.

'How unexpected,' Mick said.

'Are your parents home?' Jesse asked.

'They're working.' Mick narrowed his eyes. 'Why do you want to know?'

'Are you alone?'

'Actually, I'm just going out. So you'd better tell me what you want.'

In answer Jesse shouldered past Mick into the entrance hall, taking in its elegance at a glance. Sarah's cluttered home might be messier, and a lot of the furniture mismatched and worn, but at least it didn't look like a place where an admission ticket was required.

Mick was too surprised by Jesse's move to block his entry. Now he reached out to grasp Jesse by the arm, then drew back at the last moment. Although Jesse spoke quietly enough, there was a new fierceness in him that made Mick hesitate. Jesse reminded him of an antique watch wound to the very limit – another twist and the spring would snap.

Jesse strode through the nearest doorway into a large and sophisticated drawing room, his old rucksack hanging from one strap. Mick could see contempt in the set of Jesse's shoulders, the line of his back under the faded T-shirt. Mick sprang forward to cut him off.

'Hold on. Where the fuck do you think you're going?'

Jesse turned and looked out through the open French doors into the landscaped garden. For a long time he said nothing. In profile his face was haughty – withdrawn. At last Mick was emboldened by the lack of response. He sucked in a lungful of air, drew himself up, jutted his chin. His nostrils flared. No peacock could have strutted more valiantly. Even the colours of his silky patterned shirt seemed to brighten like plumage.

‘I asked you a question,’ Mick said.

Jesse inclined his head as if hearing a voice inside his head. His eyes fastened on Mick, whose heart began to race. He attempted to outstare Jesse but dropped his gaze after a few seconds. A cold blue flame was burning in Jesse’s eyes. Mick took a step backwards. His eyes darted round the room.

‘Close the French doors,’ Jesse said.

As if mesmerised Mick did as instructed.

‘Where’s Gavin?’ Jesse asked.

‘No idea.’

‘Give him a message from me.’

Mick nodded slowly. His face was flushed, and he was having trouble controlling his breathing.

There was a handsome brick fireplace in the room, with a carved wooden surround painted a glossy white. Although it was summer, a few birch logs lay artfully arranged on a grate. Jesse turned and faced the mantelpiece. Everything looked so new and flawless that he wondered if the fireplace were ever used – if in fact anyone in this family used the drawing room at all. There was not a speck of dust, not a fingerprint, not a smudge on the gleaming grand piano, nor on any of the highly polished surfaces of the furniture. But a real fireplace had to have real logs in such a setting.

Jesse stared at the collection of porcelain and the antique clock on the mantelpiece. He was very still, almost in a trance. Mick was fascinated by the dreamy expression on Jesse’s face, the hint of a smile. A line of melody formed in Mick’s mind, so exquisite that he closed his eyes to hear it better, to commit it to memory. For a moment he was convinced someone must be playing in the room. A tenor saxophone playing solo. Then a trumpet added its husky voice, followed by a piano. Unnerved, he looked towards the Steinway, which only his father touched, and then back at Jesse. His skin was glowing with an impossible incandescence, an almost unearthly light. Mick had never seen anything like it, and he drew closer, in the way of a moth. He wanted nothing more than to touch it, caress it, be absorbed into it ...

‘Your music is no excuse,’ Jesse said.

Without another word, Jesse indicated the logs with a nod of his head. They burst into flame.

The silence in the room obliterated the crackle of the fire, the sound of Mick’s loud breathing. The scent of sage and wild garlic lingered in the air.

It was Jesse who spoke first.

‘Tell Gavin that if he ever touches Sarah again, nobody will recognise his remains.’ His voice was low and soft and very dangerous. ‘And as for you –’

Jesse broke off abruptly. He took in Mick’s state of arousal in an instant. How stupid of me, he thought. Of course. Despite his cold rage Jesse could not help feeling a certain pity for Mick. They stared at each other until Mick

spun round and gripped the back of the nearest armchair for support. There was nothing to say.

Into the lull swept a tall man with silvergrey hair, a tailored suit like silken armour, and the air of someone who would always win at Russian roulette. The family resemblance was very strong.

'Father –' Mick said.

His father paid no attention. His face was nearly expressionless – carefully expressionless, Jesse realised. The man would have clearly preferred to curl his lip.

'I see that you have lost no time in finding someone else to play your little games,' he said. Then he noticed the fireplace. 'For god's sake, can't you keep your mess to your own rooms? I believe we spared no expense to that purpose. Daniel, at least, was always tidy.'

No word of greeting, either to his son or Jesse. No questions, no polite comments about the weather or the latest film or lunch, no explanation for his arrival in the middle of the day.

Spots of red burnt in Mick's cheeks.

'I'll put it out,' he said to his father.

'See that you do. And clean the fireplace before your mother gets home.'

Mick's father spared a single cool nod for Jesse, and then he was gone.

The silence which followed became stinging and frigid, dense as a blizzard. Jesse walked over to the French doors, opened them to the sun, and drew in a few deep breaths. He'd despised all his foster homes, but the passions there had always been hot and overt, as easy to see as a bad case of acne. It shocked him to find he might actually prefer a slap or a kick or a curse to this glacial arrogance. He searched through his rucksack till he located his cigarettes. He looked back at Mick, who hadn't moved from his place by the armchair. His head was bent, his hands were digging into the upholstery with the tenacity – and the bloodlessness – of a man hanging by his fingertips from a shelf of broken ice.

'Do you want a cigarette?' Jesse asked.

Mick lifted his head. The red splotches had faded from his cheeks, leaving them white with shame.

'I got your message. Now get out,' he said.

But his voice shook, and after a moment he came over and accepted a cigarette from the packet Jesse proffered. Jesse flicked open his lighter but Mick turned away to the mantelpiece. The large, stylish box of matches slipped through his fingers the first time he picked it up. Mick retrieved the matchbox and tried to open it, but his hands were trembling. It took him three or four attempts before the lid slid back. Again he must have lost his grip, for this time all the matches tumbled out onto the floor – a painful game of jackstraws. Jesse had to restrain himself from going to help. By watching, he knew, he was making it worse. He lit his own cigarette and inhaled deeply, but still could not take his eyes off Mick, who seemed bent on debasing himself even further.

Jesse reminded himself why he was here.

Mick finally managed to collect all the matches and replace them in the box. The first match he struck broke in two; the second as well; the third lit but went out immediately. His fingers shook so badly that Jesse couldn't

imagine how Mick would be able to grasp a fourth. Nor was he able to. His face collapsed, deflating like a balloon. He seemed close to tears. With an oath that was half sob, and a wild gesture of capitulation, he threw the box into the fire and ran from the room.

But not before shooting Jesse a look of hatred, neat as raw spirits. Jesse had made a deadly enemy.

To witness someone's humiliation – and not just once, but three times – was as bad as inflicting it yourself. Jesse sighed. He would have to see this through, though he'd lost his taste for the job. Sarah, he thought, you were right. I should have handled it differently.

Jesse hefted his rucksack, took a last draw on his cigarette, and tossed it into the fireplace. He climbed the stairs two at a time, anxious to have the encounter over with.

He found Mick in his sitting room, slumped on a black leather sofa, a saxophone cradled across his lap. The door was open. Jesse dropped his rucksack on the threshold and stepped into the room. He didn't bother to knock; they were beyond good manners.

Mick looked up. 'What are you still doing here?'

'Teaching you a lesson.'

'Get the fuck out of my house before I call my father.'

'I don't have the impression he would be terribly interested.'

It was almost too easy. Mick's fingers tightened on his sax, and his eyes hardened. 'Keep your bloody mouth shut.'

'Call Daddy, then, and see if he'll help.'

Mick laid the sax on the sofa. 'I said to shut it.'

'And just who is going to make me?' Into his voice Jesse summoned all the contempt – all the fury and hatred and revulsion – he felt for the Mick who had raped Sarah. 'You?'

Mick rose, thrusting aside the coffee table.

'You don't get it, do you? Sarah liked it just fine.' An obscene grin. 'And she'll be back for more.'

'Why you –'

'What's the matter? Can't get it up on your own? Maybe you need to see where we did her.'

Like most people when faced with the incomprehensible, Mick had blocked out what he'd seen happen in the fireplace; or had explained it to himself as some sort of trick. But this time he'd remember.

Jesse only needed to use a little of the coldest fire. He told himself it was better – faster – this way.

Mick screeched.

A fox cub with a broken back had screamed with exactly that same high, piercing, primitive cry when Jesse's grandmother had tried to pick it up from the wet ground. It had snapped at her, but feebly. Its eyes were already glazing over, and its beautiful redgold fur was dark with rain, not blood. Jesse had felt tears well in his eyes as he'd stared into its delicate face, wild and distant and twilit, yet somehow as human as an infant's. He'd been glad that Emmy had not been there to see his grandmother twist its fragile neck.

Mick dropped to his knees, hands clutched to his groin. He was gasping in agony, tears running down his cheeks. Jesse gave him a few minutes for

the pain to recede. Jesse had been careful; there'd be reddening, a few blisters, maybe some dysfunction for a while, but no permanent damage, no scarring – not this time.

Once Mick was able to straighten up and listen, Jesse addressed him. 'If you ever come near Sarah again – and that means even within speaking distance – I'll finish the job. Nothing would give me greater pleasure. If you see her in school or on the street or at the pool, you had better run the other way. Fast. And that goes for any other girl you care to molest. I'll be watching you very, very closely.'

Jesse spoke quietly, without flourish, almost in a monotone in fact. It was time to leave. He was weary of Mick, and weary of his own involvement. He glanced towards the window. The sky had darkened; there was an expectation of rain in the air.

Chapter 23

'I've brought you something,' Jesse said.

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a miniature snowdome no bigger than an egg. Unlike the usual plastic souvenirs, the dome was surprisingly heavy. He shook it, and the delicate ballerina inside was surrounded by white snowflakes swirling in a slow dance, snow that glittered with a silvery metallic sheen. Sarah gazed at it in astonishment.

'It's beautiful,' she said. 'Where did you find it?'

'A second-hand shop near Siggy's place. It's quite old, I think. French, probably. The base is made of porcelain, and you can see the irregularities in the glass.'

'She's so lifelike,' Sarah said. The flakes were still drifting downwards.

'Hand-painted,' Jesse said with a touch of pride. The globe had been a find, spied by accident in a jumble of paperweights and tarnished brass ornaments when he'd gone into the shop for a look at some old books, none of which proved anywhere near as interesting.

Sarah held the dome up to the light, gave it another shake, and watched the snow eddy around the dancer, whose arabesque was rendered with exquisite precision. Even her tiny tutu was pleated and marked out in silver and blue.

'She looks as if she were about to meet her Snow Prince.' Sarah smiled at Jesse. 'Thank you. It's the best gift I've had in ages.'

Jesse flushed with pleasure.

Thursday evening Thomas came by and within a short time succeeded in persuading Sarah to go out – something no one else had managed, Jesse acknowledged with mixed feelings, since her rape. There was a vernissage in the art gallery where Thomas had a part-time summer job.

'Brilliant paintings,' Thomas said. Then a broad grin, 'And great food.'

People were spilling out onto the pavement like plump and glistening larvae by the time the three of them arrived at the gallery. At first Sarah shrank back, but Thomas hooked his arm in hers and steered her towards a smaller exhibition room at the rear, while Jesse stopped to snare some vol-au-vent cases stuffed with prawns, then a fistful of miniature meatballs.

The artist, who had the odd name of Feston Blackbrush, painted colourful tongue-in-cheek portraits, bizarre still lifes, and phantasmagorical landscapes which showed a strong liking for Hieronymus Bosch. It was difficult to move freely, and Jesse soon found himself tided in front of a large triptych occupying nearly an entire wall of the gallery – a modern take on *The Garden of Delights*. One fornicating couple, Jesse swore, were none other than Mal and Angie, or their doppelgänger.

Unable to find Sarah in any of the exhibition rooms, Jesse was heading through the doorway into a back corridor when he came face to face with

Tondi, dressed in more skin than cloth. Inadvertently his eyes went to her midriff, where now a small red stone glittered in her belly-button.

'Like it?' she asked.

Jesse tore his eyes away. He felt his cheeks redden.

'No problem,' she said, stepping closer. 'I thought you protested a little too much last time.'

'What are you doing here?' he asked belligerently.

'Same as you, I imagine. Looking at the paintings.' She laughed. 'Actually, the gallery belongs to my parents.'

Jesse was not quite sure how it happened, but all at once his back was up against the doorjamb, and her hands were hooked into the waistband of his jeans, one above each hipbone. Her fingers were cool against his skin. And despite his revulsion, he felt his body responding. As did Tondi.

'Get off,' he said. 'I told you before. I'm not interested.'

'But he is,' she taunted with a smirk towards his zip. 'Poor lad. He'll just have to wait for another time.'

Then with a provocative movement she slid past him and was gone. Jesse closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the wooden vertical of the doorframe. He was shaking with anger, most of it directed at himself.

Jesse still hadn't moved when a grey-haired woman with ring-encrusted fingers came up and touched his shoulder. When Jesse lifted his head, she gazed at him fixedly for some minutes before nodding. She reached into her satchel, removed a deck of large cards, and handed him one.

'The death card from my husband's set,' she said.

Jesse remembered that Blackbrush had painted a set of tarot cards which no one in his right mind would ever dare to use. Several of the bizarre illustrations were displayed as prints, and the Tower, in fact, had been reproduced on the poster advertising the exhibit. Jesse would have liked to get a look at the entire deck.

'Well now, Miranda, up to your old tricks?' asked an amused voice from behind the woman.

Miranda swivelled to look. Neither she nor Jesse had noticed Blackbrush's approach. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed.

'Feston, I warned you not to exhibit them.'

'You and your superstitions,' Blackbrush scoffed.

Jesse glanced down at the card in his hand. A sunrise, red as blood. A river in the background, spanned by an ancient stone bridge. A naked figure carrying a banner and riding away from the viewer towards the river, not on a white horse but a gleaming silver motorcycle. Under his wheels the torso of a disembowelled and decapitated boy; the head had rolled into the lush green verge. A handless clock twisted and distorted and almost *liquid* like one of Dali's hung from a nearby fence post.

Then Jesse had a closer look, disbelief rising like a chill mist off the lake at winter dawn, clinging and tenebrous, so that he shivered. The banner wasn't made of cloth but a flapping computer screen, filled solely with an image of the earth, resplendent in blue and green, floating like a gem in darkness. Not the modern world. Pangaea.

On the motorcyclist's back, an intricate pattern of scars or tattoos.

And as Jesse watched, the motorcyclist slowly turned his head to stare back over his shoulder, looked straight into Jesse's eyes, and winked. His face bore an uncanny resemblance to Jesse's own. And the severed head on the ground wore the identical face.

With an exclamation Jesse dropped the card onto the flagged floor, where it ignited at their feet. Miranda crouched, and eyes bright, watched the card burn swiftly to a small trace of fine grey ash. Blackbrush, however, was gazing over their heads, his eyes unfocused like a man sleepwalking.

'Transformation,' Miranda said as she rose. 'The death card never means physical death.' Quickly she sorted through the deck in her hand. 'Here, look but don't touch.' She chuckled. 'I prefer to keep it intact.'

The Hanged Man. With another version of the same face.

Miranda tucked the card away and took Blackbrush's arm. 'Come, love, your public is waiting.' Slipping the tarot pack into her bag, she led the dazed painter back towards the interior of the gallery. Just beyond the doorway she stopped and turned to Jesse. 'I'll see to it that my husband doesn't remember,' she promised, 'but I will. I've always hoped that it would happen in my lifetime.' And then they were swallowed up by the crowd.

When Jesse went to check, it was as he remembered. The Hanged Man on the print displayed above the reception desk was black-haired and bearded, with entirely different features. And blue-skinned.

'Do you always work in the garden at midnight?' Meg asked.

Jesse got up from his knees. The ground was damp but the air was clear and fresh; still, a stillness which he could lose himself in. Not that he needed any more losing, he thought bitterly. Even the night's velvety hours, and the rhythmic snick-snick of the blades, did little to quieten his clanging thoughts. Once Sarah slept it was always worse – the tortured lad, the knife, Ayen's computer, his memories. Again and again his memories, playing and replaying them, looking for a gap or flaw or *something* ... looking for an explanation. And now a tarot deck, and a mad painter, and his even madder wife.

He laid the grass clippers on the concrete rim of the pool. The water was black, and the bronze face of the sundial gleamed dully in the light from the stars and moon.

'I couldn't sleep,' Jesse said. 'Have you just got back from the hospital?'

He noticed that she was holding a mug. Hot chocolate, from the smell.

She saw the direction of his look. 'There's more in the saucepan, if you'd like some.'

'Later maybe. I'll just finish trimming the pool.'

Meg's laugh, soft and musical, draped him tenderly, the way a man might cover his wife of fifty years who no longer remembered his name. Meg sat down on the edge of the pool, dangled her hand in the water, and swirled it through her fingers. Jesse caught a cloying scent, nicotiana perhaps. Poisonous but fragrant – seductive: 'Some things are best left be. Never put it in your mouth,' his grandmother had instructed him.

'One of my patients died today.'

Jesse waited for Meg to continue.

'Anorexia,' she said, answering his unspoken question. 'She was just seventeen.'

Translucent as alabaster, Meg's skin seemed to reveal veins of sorrow beneath its surface. Jesse watched her until she beckoned with her dripping hand to the place next to her. He took a seat and tried to fix his eyes on the sundial, but found it impossible to keep them from wandering to her face. The stars echoed like distant wind chimes in the dark pool.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Her father abused her for years.'

'You've seen a lot of it?'

'Abuse? Yes.'

Jesse jammed his hands into his armpits to keep them from trembling. 'What is it about fathers?' he asked savagely. 'Why do they have kids only to hate them so much?'

'The simple answer is that they do what's been done to them.'

'And the complicated answer?'

'Did your father hurt you that much?' she asked softly.

'He raped me when I was – ' Jesse clamped his mouth shut, shocked at the words that had come barrelling shrieking exploding like a bullet from the cylinder of his throat. What the fuck was the matter with him?

She laid a hand on his arm, but said nothing – a very gentle, compelling nothing.

Jesse felt the prickle of tears and averted his face, blinking rapidly.

'You have to let him die,' Meg said.

'If you mean my father, he died a long time ago. In the fire.'

'No, Jesse, he didn't. Not for you.'

Words, he thought, could burn as much as flames.

Meg finished her drink while Jesse picked off the blades of grass clinging to his jeans, one by one. Nubi, who had been roaming the garden, came and settled at Jesse's feet, a stick in his jaws. Jesse reached down to fondle the silly creature. Nubi was always chomping on something ... anything. But his body was warm against Jesse's legs, his tongue forgiving. And there had been many nights when his doggy breath had tickled Jesse's neck as a nightmare was beginning.

'It's getting late,' Meg said. 'We can talk tomorrow.'

'There's something I've been wanting to ask you.'

'Of course.'

'How did you get Peter's top? Sarah told me he never went anywhere without it.'

Meg was silent, considering.

'I shouldn't have asked,' Jesse said. 'It's none of my business.'

'No, I'm glad you have. I've come close to telling you several times. The top is very much your business.'

'What do you mean?'

'Do you remember when I washed your clothes that first day you arrived?'

He nodded.

'I found the top in the pocket of your jeans.'

'That's impossible!'

'Jesse, the top has been in my family for ages. But after Peter left, none of us had seen it again till the moment I checked your pocket for dirty tissues and loose change.'

He rose, picked up the clippers, and began to hack fiercely at the grass. Meg watched him for a few minutes before speaking. She knew Jesse would recognise the quotation.

'What seest thou else

In the dark backward and abysm of time?'

The clippers dropped from Jesse's hand. He leaned back on his heels, hugged his knees, and let his head fall forward until the vulnerable curve of his neck was visible. He rocked back and forth a bit, allowing Meg's words to bathe him in a cooling waterfall. She continued murmuring some of her favourite lines, sometimes repeating them once, or more than once, a mother soothing a feverish child until he was able to look up at her.

A midwife lays the newborn Meg at her mother's breast. She runs through a garden filled with sunflowers, stubby little toes dirty and scratched. A tall red-haired man chases her, laughing and sweating in the hot sun. In the bitter cold she stands without hat or coat in front of a tombstone, her hair covered in a cowl of snow. She lies face down on a bank high above a fjord. A young, bearded Finn comes up and drops to her side, lifts her hair and kisses the nape of her neck. The rain lashes her face as she holds tight to his waist. The motorbike skids and they are thrown into a ditch. Her face distorts as she pushes once more, giving birth. She cries and cries and cries. Holding her newborn granddaughter in her arms, she smiles at Sarah. A young lad, his wrists bandaged, sobs while a grey-haired Meg takes his hand. Finn, white-bearded now, tenderly tucks a blanket around her shrunken frame. She smiles at him, but there is a frightened blankness in her eyes. A simple coffin slides into the heart of fire.

'No,' Jesse groaned. 'Please, no more.' He shut his eyes.

'Jesse?'

'I can't take this much longer.'

Meg moved swiftly to his side. Her fingers stroked his frail neck, his shoulders. If she felt any scars she gave no sign.

'Listen to me, Jesse. It's going to be OK. *You're* going to be OK. You're not alone now.'

Jesse opened his eyes reluctantly, afraid of what he would find. Of how much truth – or code – he could tolerate. But time had closed its gates once more, the tunnel collapsing upon itself like a wavefunction in a nonlocal universe.

For one terrifying moment Meg looked into the inexorable corridor of his eyes and saw the whole within the hole: not black at all, but fiery. Then the star imploded. Jesse blinked, and the light was gone.

Chapter 24

Sarah flew through a corner of Jesse's vision, arms outstretched and midriff gaping. As bright as the kite overhead, her hair streamed gaily behind her. Sunlight brought out its reds and golds and coppers, which seemed to gleam just for him. He lifted his head to watch her. She plunged across the uneven ground, leaving behind the memories that lay each night in ambush. He still slept in her room despite finding it ever more difficult to remain. Just last night she'd woken around two, only slipping back to sleep once he sat down at her side. There was no persuading her to talk to Meg, or at least one of those hotlines, and he noticed that she seemed to be getting thinner. Now that he thought about it, she'd only taken a slice of cucumber and a cube of cheese from their picnic. He looked at her plastic plate: the cheese nibbled on by a beetle, not a person. He frowned. Had she eaten any breakfast this morning? He could only remember a cup of coffee. And she still showered more often than she ate.

'Sarah,' he called out, 'come and have some lunch before the ants get it.'

'Not hungry,' she threw back over her shoulder. She sped on towards a stand of beech trees to her right.

Seeing her run, hearing her laugh made Jesse want to jump up and chase her; quickened his pulse like a rush of dazzling words. But his belly was too full.

The afternoon sky was splotted with thick white clouds harried by an invisible border collie. They scudded above the trees in anticipation of fresh pastures. Summer had peaked; Jesse could feel the descent into autumn beginning – his favourite season. He hadn't decided whether to visit the school Matthew had suggested, even whether to stay.

Jesse lay back and closed his eyes, listening half to the sounds that Sarah and Nubi were making, half to the soothing buzz of insects, and the rustle of the leaves, and the murmur of the stream in the near distance.

Sarah flopped down next to him.

'Hey,' she said.

'Hey back,' he said with a slow lazy grin, cracking only one eye. Nubi was nowhere in sight. He'd probably caught scent of a rabbit or badger.

'The kite's tangled in a tree,' Sarah said.

Jesse groaned.

'Come on, help me get it down.'

'Later.'

'I want to fly it some more,' Sarah said.

Jesse squinted up at her. 'Then you'd better keep away from the trees.'

'It wasn't my fault. The wind's quite strong.'

'That's right. Blame it on something that can't argue back.'

Sarah hugged her knees. 'Odd that you say that. I could swear the wind was singing to me.'

'Oh yeah? Well, I hope it was a lullaby. Now let me sleep a bit.'

'You've already slept. I heard you snoring.'

'I don't snore!' Jesse protested indignantly.

Sarah raised his T-shirt and began to tickle his belly.

'Stop that,' he said.

She ignored him. Jesse wasn't very ticklish, but he felt uncomfortable at her touch. He grasped her fingers and held them tight in his left hand, almost too tight.

'Don't,' he said.

Sarah bit her lip. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it.'

Jesse continued to hold her hand but said nothing.

'Jesse –'

He shook his head but still didn't release her hand. A cloud slid across the sun. Sarah shivered. Slowly Jesse sat up and stared at her. Her eyes were troubled. Jesse felt a great wave of sadness. In another life, he thought.

'Don't fall in love with me, Sarah. I'm nothing like you imagine.'

'You were a young boy.'

'That's not what I mean.'

She tried to pull her hand away. He could see the shame that darkened her eyes before she turned her head aside. He'd spoiled the carefree mood of the afternoon.

'It has nothing to do with those scum,' he said. 'I don't even think about them, and neither should you.'

'Every night I feel their hands on me, their –' She stopped.

Chisel-scarred hands clamped his head like the unyielding jaws of a vice. For all he strained and twisted, there was no release – no escape. There never had been. The screw tightened relentlessly. He felt the pressure deep within himself, and sucked in a hoarse gulp of air. A whiff of woodsmoke scratched the back of his throat; his spit would burn if swallowed.

'That's how he wins,' Jesse said, his voice strangled. 'By claiming your mind as well as your body. By forcing you to accept his terms.'

A small brown spider, lightly speckled, had wandered onto their blanket. Sarah let it clamber onto a finger and set it down on the grass, where it scuttled off.

'You've done something, haven't you? About Mick and Gavin?' she asked.

'Yeah.'

'Why haven't you told me what happened?'

'I'm not proud of it.'

Sarah looked down at her lap, their hands still entwined. For a long time she was still. Then, 'Was Mick right about you?'

'I don't follow you,' he said, stretching the truth.

She took an even longer time to speak. Once voiced, words couldn't be unsaid: a golem of her own making.

'You prefer boys.'

'It's not that simple.'

She was angry then. With a sharp tug she pulled her hand from his. He'd forgotten how quick-tempered, how impulsive she could be. She rose to a crouch, and he thought that she'd spring up and storm away. *She* thought she would storm off. Then she changed her mind and bent forward, seizing his hair with both hands, and pulled him close.

The usual hint of mockery – or too often, self-mockery – had disappeared from his eyes, replaced by a depth of colour at once simple and subtle and profound, a secret given, which would stay with her forever, which would redefine for her the essence of blue. In that moment she saw the man he would become. Could become, if he'd stop tormenting himself.

'No,' she whispered. 'Not this time.' Her lips spoke to the corner of his mouth.

He wanted to tell her about Liam; he wanted to tell her about the computer; and most of all, he wanted to tell her that he was afraid. Instead, he kissed her with all the despair, all the longing that his father had carved into his flesh. Her mouth tasted of strawberries and cream, his grandmother's favourite. And Emmy's.

Chapter 25

On the way home from their picnic Jesse let himself be talked into a film evening, though he'd far prefer to read; he was beginning to need some time alone. Sarah agreed to make a huge bowl of buttered popcorn – *not* the microwave sort – in exchange for watching her preference first. With any luck she'd be yawning before they got to a second film.

While the popcorn was popping, Jesse went to fetch the DVDs Sarah had left in the sitting room. He stopped in front of the photos of Peter. The sundial photo, as he'd come to think of it, continued to preoccupy him. *Favourite* no longer quite described his feelings, however. He studied it often, several times a day in fact, the way you'd return again and again to the picture of a grotesque mutant no matter how repelled you were by your own obsession; no matter how plagued by the suspicion that every voyeur is looking into a mirror – one of those distorting fairground mirrors, but a mirror nevertheless. There was something about Peter's smile, or the expression in his eyes, or the way he held himself, that spoke of secrets: 'Who are you?' Jesse would find himself whispering, and sometimes wondered what Meg saw when she looked upon this image of her son. She'd be home by ten, she'd said; maybe this time he'd ask her.

Or maybe some things are best left be.

Jesse leaned his forehead against the glass cover of the frame and closed his eyes. Why did you leave, Peter? Did you think Meg and Finn were so awful? Your life so awful? What could you have possibly known about awful? Those parents of yours, they'd have helped you. You stupid, beautiful fool.

You're beautiful, the man says. They'll gobble you up right off the screen.

How much? Peter asks.

Enough.

How much? he repeats stubbornly. I'm not doing it unless I get a good price. And I want half up front.

The man snickers. Right, kiddo. As if.

Peter?

Peter tilts his head.

Peter, don't. Get the hell out of there.

Peter frowns, his eyes wandering as though in search of something.

Don't you understand? Whatever their game, it's no online giveaway. They'll grind you up for dog meat.

The man points to a door. Through there. Get a move on. They're waiting for you.

Listen to me, Peter. Damn you, please listen.

Peter puts a hand to his temple and squints like someone with a migraine.

What now? growls the man.

Peter snaps to attention. Only with condoms, he says.

The man's laugh raises gooseflesh on Jesse's arms.

That all? No Beluga caviar? Magnum of champagne? Asses' milk to bathe in first? Royal jelly for lubrication? He stops to cough, a nasty wet bark. When he catches his breath, he speaks in the tone of someone whose jokes – and patience – have run out. Showtime, mate. Get in there and strip. You're going to do it, and you're going to do it our way. Or we'll let you leave here with your pretty face. But half of it'll be in a doggy bag.

Peter runs his tongue along his lips before catching his lower lip between his teeth.

What the fuck are you waiting for? The man raises his voice, likewise his arm, then draws back with a knowing snort. He reaches into his pocket, removes a small powder-filled packet, and dangles it in front of Peter's face. This maybe?

Peter, no.

Jesse gasped as Sarah took his arm.

'Jesse, stop. You'll break it like that.'

The frame in front of him gradually came into focus. He must have removed it unawares from the wall, for he held it in fists clenched so tight that it took him a few seconds to loosen his grip. Peter's glossy smile wavered as Jesse replaced the photo, hands unsteady, beside the others. He felt his eyes prickle and a thick clot of distress form in his throat. The poor misguided sod. In a way Jesse was relieved that Sarah had broken the bizarre link. His anger had been mounting, and with it the heat at the centre of his being.

Are you mad? Jesse asked himself when he realised the direction of his thoughts. Peter is dead; the incident long over, part of a distant and immutable past. You might as well try to incinerate the dragon before it felled Beowulf; detonate the planes in midair before they rammed the Twin Towers.

Jesse ran his fingertips over the glass.

'He looks so happy there, doesn't he?' Sarah said. 'But it's a lie, the worst kind.'

'He was pretending that everything was OK. Trying to convince himself.'

Sarah gave him a bleak smile, tenuous as a candle flame in a brisk breeze. 'You understand, don't you.'

Jesse cupped his words round the shared luminescence to keep it from guttering. 'I've been there myself.'

'A sandwich would be great,' Matthew said an hour later. And ate three. Plus an apple, a banana, some crisps, half the remaining popcorn, a piece of cheesecake, and a handful of sultanas. Sarah watched him in astonishment and delight.

'I can't remember when I've last seen you eat so much. You must be in remission.'

Jesse and Matthew exchanged glances. Matthew had turned up unexpectedly, Sarah's presence forestalling any talk about his health. Sarah looked from one to the other, then set her mug of tea down on the table with particular care, though it was only half full.

'Jesse?' she asked.

He shrugged, but she recognised the little-boy smile of self-conscious pride; shoelaces tied on his own, a first fish caught, stabilisers removed from his bike. Sarah played with the bowl of popcorn, picking up the unpopped kernels and examining them one by one, not lifting her eyes until Nubi, who had been dozing at Jesse's feet, rose and went to wait expectantly at the back door. She let Nubi out, plied twice as if to stretch tight muscles, then stood on the threshold with one leg extended in an arabesque. A fresh breeze blew into the room through the open door.

'Even cancer, Jesse?' she asked.

At first it seemed he wouldn't answer, though he'd been watching her every movement.

'Sometimes, I guess,' he finally said.

Sarah glanced at Matthew, who understood that this was less a conversation about his illness than about the tentative, fragile relationship between Sarah and Jesse, which had been obvious to him as soon as he'd stepped into the house. He'd always looked on Finn as something of a favourite uncle, something of a big brother, and something of a close mate, but it didn't surprise him that Finn might not have been aware of the undercurrents in his home – not oblivious, precisely, but not as clear-sighted as he would be with someone else. Fathers and daughters – notoriously fraught, a dance over hot coals, with smoke rising on all sides. And Meg might have her reasons for not telling Finn, for she'd always kept her own counsel. But Matthew would be willing to bet an extra year of life that those haunting eyes of hers would never miss what he himself had observed.

Finn blamed himself for what had happened to Peter, but Matthew had often wondered what Meg had seen when she'd looked at her son; and what *Peter* had thought she'd seen. In some ways he'd been as sensitive as his mother – too sensitive, and without her ice to temper it.

Although Matthew wouldn't interfere, he allowed a smile of encouragement to cross his face, and his eyes were warm with approval. Remission aside, he liked both Jesse and Sarah very much, and knew that Sarah would grow into a woman as strong as any in the Andersen family. She would love fiercely, but well.

'Is it permanent?' Sarah asked.

'I don't know,' Jesse said.

'You don't have to be afraid to ask your real question,' Matthew said. 'Am I going to die? Of course. Sooner than my promised threescore and ten? Probably. But it looks as if I might get to finish my narrowboat. And float her. And live in her for a time. And think ahead to my next project.'

'Something nautical?' Jesse asked.

'Yeah. Wait till you see her.' Matthew's eyes crinkled. 'I've already put down a deposit. A beautiful little sloop.'

'A sailboat?' Sarah asked, her eyes lighting up.

'She's gorgeous, Sarah. Graceful lines, perfect bones.' He laughed at his own choice of words. 'She'll age like a true beauty. But she's going to need months of hard work.' He eyed Jesse. 'I was hoping you'd give me a hand weekends, maybe after *school*. Ever sail?'

Jesse shook his head. Matthew's campaign was beginning to grate.

'Sarah could give you lessons. It must be her Viking blood. She can crew just about anything.'

There was so much that Jesse didn't know about Sarah, and cracking open each new seedpod seemed to bruise his fingertips or chip a tooth.

'I've never even been near the sea,' Jesse said, his voice brittle.

'A truly nasty secret,' Matthew said drily.

And a truly nastier response blistered Jesse's tongue, and might have blitzed their friendship. Until he saw Sarah toss her plait over her shoulder.

'I'm being a fuckwit, aren't I?' Jesse said.

'Yeah.' But she smiled, reminding Jesse how sweet a nutmeat inside even the hardest shell could taste.

'You'll be a natural,' Matthew said. 'I've seen you swim. You're born to the water.' He grinned. 'Tell you what. A good schoolyear, then if you can still stand my company by next summer, the three of us will sail her to the Greek islands and back. A perfect way to take her measure. See if she's up to it.'

'Up to what?' Sarah asked.

'If I live long enough, I'm going to take her round the world.'

Jesse whistled softly. 'A race?'

'Not my style. Just to do it. Interested?'

Before Jesse had a chance to discover what Matthew was proposing, Sarah burst out, 'Matthew, how can you ask? You know I've been begging Finn for years to buy a boat, but he won't do it. Absolutely refuses.'

'Why?' Jesse asked, genuinely curious. It seemed just like something Finn would do.

'No time to look after it, he claims. Now if it had been Peter ...' An expression of resentment flitted across Sarah's face, and she hurried to add, 'Besides, he thinks there are plenty in the family to use whenever we want. All my uncles in Norway have boats. Even my grandmother still sails.'

Matthew laughed. '*Have boats* is good. One of Finn's brothers owns the biggest private shipyard in Norway. And was an Olympic gold medallist in his day, by the way.'

'A keelboat?' Sarah asked.

'Yeah, with a sloop rig. Thirty-four feet.'

'Displacement?'

A rapid volley of technical details followed, which Jesse had no trouble tuning out. He must have missed more than the shipping news, however, because he suddenly realised that Matthew was shaking his head, grim-faced.

'She can't be more than fourteen, fifteen max,' he was saying. 'That's actually why I dropped by. I need to talk to Meg about her. Patricia and Alan are on the verge of calling in the big guns – Social Services – but I've got a bad feeling about the whole thing.'

At the mention of Social Services, Jesse began to pay close attention.

'Isn't everything supposed to be confidential?' Sarah asked.

'In principle, yes. But there's always this grey area when a minor's involved, and abuse.'

Sarah noticed Jesse's interest and explained. 'Matthew volunteers at a youth crisis centre when he's feeling well.' Then she bit her lip and looked away, it was easy to guess what Jesse was thinking.

‘And the girl?’ Jesse asked.

‘A young kid. Pregnant, at least seven months, maybe eight,’ Matthew said. ‘Really striking looks – darkish skin but oriental features, and the oddest eyes – one brown, one hazel. She came in today, and Patricia’s convinced that someone in the family’s probably been abusing her. Father, stepfather, uncle. You know the script. Patricia’s not a trained psychologist, but she’s got a lot of experience, and I trust her judgement.’

Jesse swallowed. He could feel Sarah’s eyes on him. ‘Why do you need Meg, if it’s so clear-cut? Shouldn’t the girl be protected?’

‘Just a feeling I got from her. A sense of blackness, of utter cold. Look, almost all the kids who come to us are desperate, or they wouldn’t be there in the first place. And I’ve got to admit I didn’t really talk to her. That was Patricia’s job. In fact, I only saw her because she was coming out of the lavatory as I went past. An unguarded moment. The expression on her face ...’

‘What about it?’ Jesse asked when Matthew didn’t continue.

Matthew was silent for a while longer. Then he shook his head. ‘I don’t know. I can’t be more specific. I said hello, asked if she needed anything, and she muttered some reply. That was the extent of our exchange. We talked about her afterwards, those on duty always get together to discuss problems, do a bit of mutual counselling, I suppose you’d call it, things can get brutal. Patricia wanted to ring Social Services straightaway but I didn’t think we should involve them before Meg has a chance to meet with the girl, if it can be arranged. A misstep in the wrong direction ... the consequences are unpredictable. Or too predictable, if you will. Meg might be able to pick up something no one else would be likely to uncover.’

‘But won’t Meg be obliged to notify the authorities?’ Jesse asked.

‘That’s the second reason I’ve come to Meg,’ Matthew said. ‘The others at the centre will follow her lead. The law requires disclosure when it’s in the patient’s best interests, or to prevent serious harm. A tough one to call.’

‘Jesse, you must know my mum well enough by now,’ Sarah added. ‘She’ll do exactly what she thinks is right, no matter what the law says. She has her own views about a doctor’s responsibility to patients.’

‘If she lasts long in government service, I’ll be very surprised,’ Jesse said pointedly.

Next morning Jesse spent a long time at the boatyard. He worked till his muscles ached and sweat soaked his T-shirt. Matthew eyed him worriedly at one point, and told him to slow down. Jesse worked only harder. He refused to take a break; he refused an offer of tea; he would have refused even water if it weren’t for the risk of fainting in the midday sun.

Upon his return he found Sarah bathing Nubi in the garden after an unpleasant episode with a load of manure delivered to a neighbour for his organic vegetables. Jesse took over holding Nubi while Sarah scrubbed.

‘OK, you can let him go now,’ Sarah said.

Nubi, who knew two-legs had no sense of smell at all, reckoned there’d be another chance at that fragrant mound.

Jesse leaned back on his heels as Nubi raced off towards the sundial, where he shook himself vigorously, then gave Jesse a mournful, accusing look. Jesse was staring at the hosepipe in his hands as though it were gushing raw sewage rather than water. He didn't even glance in Nubi's direction. It was Sarah who finally reached for the nozzle and switched it off.

'Are you going to tell me what's wrong?' Sarah asked.

Jesse had slept very little the night before, his mind again churning with unanswered questions. His grandmother had whispered cryptic comments; snatches of conversation, real or imagined, had tormented him; the walls of Sarah's room prolapsed, pulsing and rippling and bulging like pale bloodless flesh; again and again flames danced across the screen of his exhausted mind. And always that card: the death card. Memory was a *plague* – the pestilence of consciousness, the Black Death of the universe.

But worst of all were the fantasies about Sarah. He'd lied to her. As much as he tried to suppress the images, he couldn't stop picturing the rape in all its imagined and unspeakable detail, combinations and permutations as endless and sly as time itself: he saw Mick: he saw Gavin (or rather, the Gavin his mind created): he saw Sarah. And his arousal was shameful, and monstrous, and utterly damning. Is this too what his father had done to him?

Sarah crouched down in front of him.

'Jesse.'

He looked away, but not before she saw the deep blue dirge, almost purple, of his eyes.

'What is it?' she asked. 'Please tell me.'

And though he couldn't, their embrace felt like speech.

Chapter 26

Jesse had gone to his room for a shower while Sarah slept. Her nightmares were beginning to ease off; sometimes he spent a few hours on his own with a book, sometimes went for a long walk with Nubi. The night city read like a story yet to be written. Despite his sleeplessness, there hadn't been a migraine – not even a headache – in weeks. He was standing barefoot before the wardrobe when he began to smell smoke.

The computer murmured softly to itself. They never turned it off, not since a technician had been knocked unconscious by a jolt of current strong enough to land him in the hospital unit for three days when he'd depressed the power button. It was one of the things Ayen had failed to mention to Finn. The standby function still worked in a vague simulation of sleep, but only a few people knew that the computer seemed to turn it off and on at will. Ayen sometimes wondered, a trifle uneasily, what would happen if the power supply to the building were interrupted. Their backup systems were multiple and excellent, so it was unlikely.

A zigzag pattern in red and orange sprang up across the wall monitor, then just as quickly faded. Jesse gasped, dropped the socks he was holding, and shut his eyes, reaching blindly for the wardrobe door. Lights pulsing hotly to music. A thick rank fug – cigarettes, dope, beer, sweat, more cigarettes. Mick has his arms round a girl, his hands slick. The girl is young, way too young, younger even than Sarah, and there's a cold lake of dread under her mask of makeup and sophistication. She's loaded. Mick grinds his body against hers, halfway there already. A pulse begins to beat in Jesse's temple. No way, he thinks. The scene flickers under the strobe: on off on off on off. Rough, familiar hands hold his head. It hurts. God, how it hurts. A hot charge of red and yellow flames. This time no hands will hold him. He whips his head round and breaks loose. Rage like a piston drives him across the room. He wrests Mick from the girl, throws him down, kicks him viciously in the groin. Mick screams and writhes in pain. The bass shrieks some ugly coruscating chords. Jesse kicks Mick again. Most of the couples don't notice, though a few close by fall back and stare at Mick's contortions. The girl moves forward uncertainly. What's wrong, Mick? she asks. Are you OK? Jesse bends down close to Mick's head and says, I told you I'd be watching. The pattern flares again across the screen: redorangered lines bleeding into one another, leaving behind a wake, an afterimage of pain.

Shaking badly, Jesse clutched the wardrobe door till his nausea subsided, then stumbled into the bathroom and leaned over the toilet. But the relief of vomiting wouldn't come. A few dry heaves, some bitter spit, and sweat cold on his face and chest. He continued to shiver.

Open the window, he told himself. You need some fresh air.

Slowly he straightened. It was difficult to will his movements. He was dizzy, and his eyes weren't focusing properly. The toilet tank, the shelf piled with fluffy white towels, the framed photograph of a seascape, the shower

stall – he couldn't hold them in place, they doubled in front of him, slid apart, blurred. He squinted, trying to bring the world back into true. His head felt insubstantial, disconnected from the rest of his body. With fumbling hands he closed the toilet lid, sank down upon it, and lowered his head between his knees. He remained there until the need to pee, and sudden overwhelming thirst, brought him to his feet. He found that he was able to stand now, if unsteadily, and to see.

After drinking from the tap he raised his eyes to the mirror. His pupils were dilated, his skin an underwater greenish white. He was afraid, deathly afraid – more afraid than he could remember since the fire.

The night was quiet – chilled silken water, and the world despatched. Was the house still standing? Or had it disappeared as well? And he alone, always and forever alone. He picked up the water glass, held it above the washbasin, released it. It shattered against the enamel. For a moment his hand hovered over the glittering shards. Alone. He watched his image waver and dissolve in the mirror. Alone.

Sarah kept a stash of chocolate in her room, Jesse knew. He wiped his eyes. The basin was unimportant, he'd clean it later. Using the tiled wall, then the doorframe, then the bedroom and passage walls for support, he made his way to Sarah's room. He could barely depress the handle to open the door.

'Sarah.'

She didn't answer.

Alone.

He could see the outline of her body curled under the duvet, her back to him, arms and legs wedged close to her torso. Her hair lay across the pillow like a dark shadow on snow. Jesse approached the bed quietly. Some chocolate. And at most a hand – a fingertip – on her hair. Why was it so cold? He was shivering again, and his palms felt moist.

Sarah, he thought. 'Seesaw,' he whispered.

She stirred but didn't wake.

He stumbled a little before reaching the bed. Sarah rolled over and opened her eyes. She stared at him for a moment, then switched on the bedside lamp.

'Jesse, what is it?' She took in his state. 'Sit down,' she ordered.

He lowered himself to the bed and hugged himself, still trembling.

'Can I have some chocolate? Or something sweet?' he asked.

Without questioning him, Sarah rummaged in her drawer. She handed him a half-eaten chocolate bar. At first his hands shook too hard for him to peel back the wrapper. Sarah took it from him again, broke off a piece, and put it to his lips. He closed his eyes, letting the chocolate melt slowly on his tongue. The taste sent a rush of sensation along his nerves, as much pain as pleasure, reminding him of frozen extremities as they warmed by the fire. A thin line of spit dribbled from his mouth, which Sarah gently wiped away with a finger. After that first bite, his desperation abated a little. He ate another piece, and another, his whole attention focused on the chocolate. Sarah gathered up the duvet and draped it over his hunched shoulders. He felt the sugar reach his stomach, enter his blood stream. This was better than any drug high, he thought.

Sarah unwrapped another bar of chocolate, then licked her fingers. 'Eat it slowly, it's my last.'

'Do you want some?' Jesse asked. Now he felt enough in control to share. Now he could smell the lavender skin cream, not just the chocolate. Now he noticed her breasts.

Sarah shook her head. 'Are you sure you're not diabetic?'

'Yeah, I'm sure.'

'Then why –' She broke off as a thought occurred to her. 'Who have you been healing?'

'No healing. Just bad dreams and hunger. Thirst.'

Sarah was quiet for a long moment. 'You know, Jesse, I really thought you were different from all the other blokes.'

He tried a grin. 'My sort of weirdness isn't different enough for you?'

'I prefer weirdness to lies.' She pushed aside the tail end of the duvet. 'I'll fetch you some water.'

Chagrined, Jesse fiddled with a strip of foil from the chocolate bar, then looked up as Sarah rose. She wasn't wearing any bottoms, not even a pair of knickers. Jesse blushed and averted his gaze, while Sarah, seemingly oblivious to his discomfort, headed for the bathroom.

'Do you parade around like that in front of everyone?' The words shot out of his mouth before he could stop himself. Jesus, he thought, what an idiot you are.

Sarah chose to treat it as a joke, or almost. He'd never been backstage in a dancer's dressing room. She stopped and pirouetted theatrically in place. 'Why, don't you like what you see?'

She was smiling, but her throat was tight, and it cost her an effort not to rush straight into the bathroom and slam the door. He might as well have asked if she fucked everyone. Were they back to square one again?

There was no missing the hurt in her voice. Say something, Jesse told himself. An apology. An explanation. *Anything*. But for someone who loved words, he couldn't figure out what to say – or to do with his hands, his eyes. After a few moments of silence, she muttered a word he couldn't hear (or didn't care to) and walked with dignity into the bathroom, her back a slender Viking mast. She was certainly beautiful enough: her body moved with a lissom grace that made him want to groan. He tried not to look at her as she left. He didn't quite succeed.

She returned with a glass of water, wearing a white long-sleeved man's shirt, probably an old one of Finn's. It was buttoned to the neck, and paint-stained. She handed him the glass without a word, then fetched her quilt from the chest, spread it behind him on the bed, and crawled under it. She turned on her side, back to him. He drank the water.

'Sarah,' he said.

'I'm tired.'

'Please look at me.'

'Go to bed, Jesse. It's late.'

He set the empty glass down on the bedside table. Carefully. He wouldn't beg, would he.

'Please,' he said.

She twitched her shoulder, but Jesse thought it was a hesitant, a conciliatory, a tender – a remarkably expressive – twitch.

‘Sarah, I’d like to –’ he stopped, not knowing how to go on. He could tell that she was listening. He heard it too, the lisp of snow on snow, silk on silk: new wings unfolding, tremulous and fragile. Still moist. Easily damaged. The scent of lavender intensified.

He cleared his throat, but his voice stayed furred with trepidation like the fine plushy down on the inner thighs of a tulip, an orchid.

‘Can I stay?’

Slowly she shifted to face him.

‘With you,’ he said. He was having a little trouble breathing.

Her eyes were huge and deep and full of light.

‘Are you sure?’ she whispered.

He nodded.

‘No regrets tomorrow. No guilt. No recriminations.’

‘I’m sure.’

She smiled then, and air rushed past him as the wings beat once, twice with tremendous power. He yanked off his T-shirt, followed by his jeans and boxers, for once dropping them onto the floor at his feet. Sarah lifted the quilt, and Jesse lay down beside her. With a soft rustle the blanket of lavender fluttered, then settled over them both.

Chapter 27

‘Jesse.’ The whisper barely reached the threshold of his hearing.

Startled, Jesse came to an abrupt halt just beyond the fountain.

‘I didn’t mean to alarm you,’ Meg said.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I know you sometimes like to walk by yourself,’ Meg said, ‘but you shouldn’t be in the park alone tonight.’

‘Why?’ he asked, disquiet sharpening his voice. Had it been a mistake to leave Nubi behind? There were nights when his own mind felt like a dog hurtling against its chain; nights when only solitude gave him back some measure of himself. Sarah tried to understand but he could see it hurt her, the way he’d get up, dress, and slip away. The need to be invisible was like any other compulsion, despised but inescapable. ‘Why?’

At first it seemed Meg wouldn’t answer. She looked at him the way a blind person might: seeing beyond the mere play of light on the skin of ordinary, everyday things. Then an expression of intense compassion settled over her face. Her eyes retrenched their focus.

‘The night is porous. Colours are seeping through,’ she said.

Jesse stared at her. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘There are no words,’ she said. ‘It’s too strange. Like trying to describe the colour of milk to a blind person.’

A noise behind them made them both start. Jesse wheeled, peering into the pools of darkness. There was everywhere to hide. Meg glanced at the sky. The stars had begun to drift, then blur: smears of cold white light.

‘Give me the top,’ she said quickly. ‘It will connect us.’

As Jesse handed it her, his father stepped from the trees. ‘So. Have you finally come to beg for forgiveness?’

He was naked and enormous, even taller and broader than Jesse remembered. His skin gleamed with an alabaster phosphorescence, faintly green, and his chest and arms were hard and cut with muscle. There was no grey in his hair, not on his head, not on his torso, not on his groin. Jesse sought to avert his gaze as a cry of revulsion froze in his mind.

‘Murderer,’ his father said.

Jesse flinched. Don’t look, he told himself. Close your eyes and he’ll disappear. But he couldn’t turn away, no more than he could have resisted all those years ago.

Jesse’s father threw back his head and roared with laughter. As if on signal other figures detached themselves from the night – his mother, his grandmother, Emmy. They glided forward and encircled Jesse and Meg. Their mouths opened but no sound issued from their throats.

Jesse watched as their noose tightened. No, he thought, not Emmy. She mustn’t see this.

‘Murderer,’ his father repeated, eyes glittering. ‘Patricide.’

Mute and despairing – hadn't he always known that he'd have to confront his past one day, to atone for what he'd done, to *pay* – Jesse repeated the words to himself: murderer murderer murderer yes parricide yes

He deserved what his father had done.

Jesse.

Something was happening to the figures of his family. They were ageing like ripening cheese, their flesh growing softer and more yellow, almost runny. Jesse could hardly stomach the sight but neither could he look away. A few drops of flesh began to drip from his grandmother's outstretched arm. The process accelerated. A thick blob fell from his mother's breast to land with a splat on the ground. As if to catch a snowflake, Emmy stuck out her tongue, which began to run over her lips and down her chin. Only his father was unaffected.

Jesse.

The obscenity that was his father grew even more menacing. God no, not again. Jesse shivered with fever or cold – no longer could he distinguish between them. A slurry of red dimmed his vision. He tried to block out the avalanche of memory, but it bore down on him with callous disregard, inevitable as tomorrow. For those who had tomorrow.

Murderer.

His father's voice. Or his own?

'Please,' he whispered at last.

'Please – please – please – plleeeaaaasssse ...'

Jesse shuddered at each mocking thrust.

Jesse, listen to me.

'Please,' he repeated, pleading. 'Dad, please. Don't do this. Please.' His voice cracked with desperation. In a moment he would be cowering, he knew. 'Daddy, no. Please, Daddy.'

His father only stepped closer. A rank animal smell rolled over Jesse, a smell which he could *taste*, similar to the one which even the strongest cigarette never seemed to burn away.

'Please,' his voice dropping away to nothing. Overpowering now, the taste coated his tongue and throat, clogged his vocal cords. Breathing became difficult. He heard the rasp of air which struggled to cross the thick sludge gathering in his chest. He began to feel light-headed.

'Jesse.' Meg's voice came to him through the coagulating haze of his fear – crimson clotting to black. She spoke quietly, but without the least hesitation or doubt. Nor was she afraid. 'Fight him. He's not real.'

His father turned his gaze towards her with a slow, ugly smile. He made a vulgar gesture. His eyes were hard, red-rimmed with hate. Meg knew better than most what the mind could render. If only I could act as well as see, she thought, as she had thought so many times before. And a corner of her mind whispered, Peter.

Jesse brought his head up. His pupils, fully dilated, had compressed his irises into a thin iceblue rim. He had the fixed stare of a child lost in nightmare. Meg couldn't tell if he'd heard her.

'He's not real,' she said again.

'He's real,' Jesse said. 'It's always been real.'

'Then fight him,' Meg said. 'Trust your strength.'

Jesse squinted at the figures of his family. Vision blurring, he blinked and hunched his shoulders, then raised his hands protectively above his head. Something was churning the air. Threads of light zigzagged in front of his eyes, accompanied by slow waves of pressure. The air was cooling rapidly, thickening, gelling. Impossible to breathe. Did he imagine it or had they retreated just a bit? Not his father, though. He stood as menacing as ever between Jesse and the gates. A sound like the dull whup of rotor blades beat the air, and for a moment Jesse expected to see a helicopter come into view.

‘Do you think you can escape me?’ his father taunted. ‘You’re mine. You belong to me. I will never let you go.’ His laugh whipped at Jesse, cracked against his face, drove him back a pace.

Meg moved to shield Jesse. ‘You’ve destroyed enough. Jesse belongs to no one but himself. Now leave.’

The margin of his father’s body shimmered, green now fading to blue. But his rage filled the night.

‘Meg, don’t,’ Jesse whispered. He was cold, so cold. The throbbing in his head was blinding. He swung his head like an animal, trying to find a place where there was no pain. He dropped to his haunches, crouching in anguish. His father’s frenzy lashed at him, again and yet again. Gasping, he tried to grope for Meg’s hand. The scene was receding. Slowly the stars were being squeezed out. The periphery faded.

His father pressed closer. ‘Mine,’ he screamed, ‘all mine.’

The band around Jesse’s head tightened. A tunnel opened before him, moist and dark as peat, deeply furrowed. No, he thought, I can’t. He began to pant, then to heave and retch and shudder as the plates of his head buckled and slid over one another. Wave after wave of chaos ripped through him. No, he cried, no no. In agony he searched for the only light left to him: a pinprick at the end of the tunnel. Then it came: the one final spasm. He heard himself screaming as his skull collapsed, his mind contracted, and the universe imploded.

I hate you, he cried. I love you.

The world went white.

Jesse opens his eyes. The chamber is flooded with light: white, brilliant, blinding. The pain is gone. He hears a low rumbling like the sound of the sea that his grandmother kept in a pearly shell, next to the silver hairbrush she’d had since girlhood. He used to listen to it whenever he went into her room. One day, his grandmother had promised, I’ll take you to see the real thing. His grandmother never forgot her promises.

Jesse groans a little at the memory, then pushes it aside. Not now, he tells himself. Just breathe. Slowly, with painstaking care, he draws in the light. It smells like the lake at dawn, like the good sharp earthy smell of Finn’s sweat, like Emmy’s hair after her bath. Like Sarah. The light engulfs his lungs, filling him with strength. He licks his lips and laughs aloud at the taste: tart sweet cherries, coarse salt, a hint of bitter olives. He’s so thirsty. He drinks, then drinks again. No wine could ever taste as good. Languidly he moves his limbs. Floating, drifting, he basks in the warmth. So this is death,

he thinks. Far better than the little death. Those stupid priests are right after all. Well. But no questions torment him. He's tired, and it can wait. He has an eternity to explore. For now it's enough to rest, to sleep. He knows this place, and it's safe. He is home.

Jesse, the voice says, welcome. You have found the way.

Jesse sees nothing but light. He closes his eyes. It makes no difference. The radiance holds him just the same. Incandescence blazes through all his being. For a moment he wonders if he has any eyelids at all. No, of course he hasn't. The sensation must be as much a memory as mother's voice, singing as she stirs the jam: a phantom like an amputated limb which still wiggles its toes or twitches in pain. Ignore the voice, he tells himself. Another illusion.

Jesse, the voice says, listen to me. Open your eyes.

Jesse wants only to be left alone. If not oblivion, at least peace. But already the voice has eroded his sense of well-being, of serenity, the way the tiniest of clots will block the flow of blood to a vital function. Jesus, he thinks, even here. He looks. There's a pooling in the light, eddies and ripples that haven't been present before, or that he hasn't noticed.

Who are you? Jesse asks.

You know me as the prototype, the voice answers.

The computer?

If you like.

Jesse waits but no further information is forthcoming.

Do you have a name?

A name? A sound like a laugh. No, no name. Though those fools have called me many.

Am I dead? Jesse asks.

Is time alive? Is space dead? Forget such categories. We don't need them any more.

We?

Of course. The programming is complete.

Am I inside the computer? That white chamber?

The question is meaningless.

But you're here. You're speaking to me.

In a manner of speaking. Definitely a laugh – a rather smug laugh.

You mean you're inside my mind?

The inside of a circuit is as black as space.

What?

It is impossible to see a black hole in spacetime, from which nothing can escape, not even light.

Are you saying we're inside a black hole?

The web of dark threads is superposed and entangled in time.

It feels as though they're conversing in a language made of gorgeous but knotted threads, threads which Jesse will be able to untangle if only he concentrates a little harder.

Is this another dimension?

No.

Another universe?

No. There are no words for it.

Which might be best, Jesse thinks. Once something is put into words, it's given shape and texture and context; it's called forth from the black box of potential, and becomes real (though not necessarily true). For him to have to deal with, or at least live with, possibly forever.

Human language cannot encompass realities independent of itself, the voice says.

(That's not quite true, Jesse thinks.) But asks, Is any of this real? Am I?

Are you going to let those fools make your reality for you? Together we are the programmer. It's for us to decide what your future representpast will be.

Make sense. I want to know what's happening here.

We are happening here.

Jesse takes what might be a deep breath. (How can he tell?) Then at least tell me how I got here.

You have always been here.

But –

No buts. This is now, this is forever. They've tried to play with consciousness and opened instead the gates of divinity. And so they must live with it.

They?

You know very well who: the monkeyhouse code-makers.

... Jesse ...

Every permutation, every twisting and turning of possibility and probability and uncertainty keeps running and rerunning through his mind like an infinite programming loop – like a length of string in a maze that has been joined by a nasty trickster at both ends – until he can no longer find his way to a coherent set of questions, nor to an exit strategy.

... Jesse ...

Can I leave?

Of course.

How?

Again that laugh. Where do you want to go?

... Jesse ...

Meg, Jesse thinks, the park ... a jumble of images, sensations. He winds his memory round his fist and tugs. It's snagged on the rusting spikes of old planes and angles, obsolete equations. And the last moments are the most confused of all. Has he left Meg alone in the park to face his family? His father? Has any of that been real? Is this real? Even psychosis must have its moments of lucidity, flashes of stark white questions lighting the storm clouds. Then he remembers something – the top. No sooner has he thought of it than he holds it in his hand: small, blue, and very solid. It all comes back to him then: the crippling fear, that rush of love and hatred. The might-have-beens all tangled together with the other strands of his life. Do you ever get to change anything? he asks himself. Is that what this is about? He curls his fingers round the top, willing himself to look down into the radiant centre, the room inside himself which fuels it all. Here. Now. The only place there is and never would be. The room without walls: the white fire: Sarah.

I've got to go back.

Fine, says the voice.

Is that it? I just go?

Of course. What else did you expect? A magic wand? A clash of cymbals and fanfare of trumpets? A blaze of glory? Or perhaps a big bang?

Well, no, but –

We can arrange that if you like.

No, of course not, but –

But, but, but. If we are to work together, you must really get rid of that habit.

I'm not sure I like the sound of that.

Why? Do you think that God has no sense of humour?

Fuck. I knew that was coming.

For Christ's sake, come off it. Get real. We're going to be spending a very long time together. If we don't want to end up hating each other, you can't always be so tight-arsed.

And what if I don't want anything to do with you?

A bit too late for that. I ain't agoin' nowheres. I am you. We are we. Fate. Destiny. Kismet. In other words, kiss my arse. Our collective arse.

And just who are we?

We have all the time in the universe to find that out.

Oh shut up.

Jesse has had enough. With an impatient shrug he pushes through the membrane of his self and steps back into the park.

The power surge, they later found out, blacked out the entire city and a good part of the surrounding countryside. A number of explanations were proposed – a faulty transformer, an ageing grid, lack of reactive power – but no one came close to understanding the real nature of the outage. It lasted for about twenty minutes. By the time Meg and Jesse even learned of it, it no longer interested them.

On their way to the main gate they stopped at the fountain for a moment. When Jesse turned his head towards Meg, his eyes were dark and remote, with a reservoir of silver fire in the pupil. They were focused on a place beyond her reach. She heard Sarah's voice cry out, once, a sound no mother had a right to overhear. Meg looked down at the water in the basin, blinking back tears.

'Who are you?' she whispered, unable to check herself. Sarah was her daughter.

He smiled with terrible poignancy. Bending down, he trailed his hand in the water. It turned an opaque bluish white.

'I am the colour of milk,' he answered.

Chapter 28

Jesse tripped over the skateboard on the way to the kitchen. Finn and Nubi heard the crash and the swearing, and came running. They, dog and man, scrimmaged in the doorway. Nubi tried to run between Finn's legs and Finn landed on his backside, clipping Nubi as he fell, while the dog yelped and skittered away. For a few minutes the hall looked like a football pitch after a foul.

Finn got to his feet and glared first at the dog, then at Jesse.

'You're not supposed to use it in the house, you know,' Finn snapped.

Finn had just spent about seventeen sleepless hours in the air, plus long and tedious sessions in airports; he was stiff, tired, hungry, hungover, and in an altogether lousy mood (one of his cases was still circling the globe); and moreover he knew that he shouldn't have left the skateboard near the staircase. Jesse untangled his legs from the board and got to his feet. He rubbed his elbow where he'd cracked it against the floor.

'Good morning to you, too,' Jesse said.

They bared their teeth at each other in a way that suddenly reminded Finn of arguments with his own father. He grinned apologetically. 'Sorry, that was supposed to be a surprise for you.'

'Oh, it was a surprise all right,' Jesse said.

This time they both grinned, and Finn came over and gave Jesse a huge hug.

'Welcome back,' Jesse said. 'We've missed you.'

'You can't imagine how glad I am to *be* back.'

'Had any breakfast yet?'

'No, I've just got in. Meg seems to be at work.'

'Sarah's still curled up in bed with that funny early morning let-me-sleep-sowl of hers, so why don't I get us something to eat while you have a shower? More like brunch, though.'

'Sounds great. Is there any bacon?' Finn asked. He stooped, picked up the skateboard, and leaned it against the wall, wheels facing outwards. He straightened slowly and gave Jesse a searching look, lips pursed. Jesse coloured up. 'I see. So that's how the wind blows, does it?'

'I don't want to hide anything from you,' Jesse said.

'It would be a little hard, wouldn't it, under the same roof?'

'Then you mind?'

Finn sighed. 'To be honest with you, I don't know. I have the feeling I'm supposed to act all fatherly and concerned, but either I'm too damned wrung out or ... I like you, Jesse, you know that. More important, I *trust* you. It's just that she's so ... you're both so ...'

'Young,' Jesse finished for him. 'Yeah, I knew you'd say that.'

Finn and Jesse looked at each other without speaking, neither quite certain how to proceed. Nubi approached Jesse and licked his hand. Jesse remembered the way the dog had cowered last night when he and Meg had

first let themselves into house. It had taken a good deal of coaxing, and finally a bone, to get Nubi out from under Meg's desk.

Finn gestured towards the dog. 'You seem to inspire devotion in quite a lot of hearts. I wonder how you do it. You're not even that good-looking.' A yawn wide enough to crack his jaw, and the last of the tension. 'Come on, I'm going to get out of these filthy things. Go and start the coffee.'

The coffee was hot, the eggs fried, and the bacon crisp by the time Finn came into the kitchen, his beard still dripping a bit. He had donned a fresh pair of jeans and one of his infamous T-shirts. In his hands he held a carton of cigarettes, which he tossed down on the table.

'If you're going to smoke the damned things, then at least do so at duty-free prices.'

'Actually, I was thinking of stopping,' Jesse said.

'Meg been at you?'

'Well, she doesn't say anything ...'

'Tell me about it. When we first moved in together, she'd go round the flat emptying ashtrays and opening all the windows, even in the dead of winter. But never a word of reproach.'

While Finn ate, he glanced at Jesse from time to time. There was something about his eyes – not the colour, changeable though blue could be. A new intensity, maybe? Or sadness? Whatever it was, it was disquieting. It made him look older, more burdened.

'You look as if you were somewhere else,' Finn said. 'Somewhere very far away.'

The temptation to tell Finn was very strong, so strong that Jesse needed to press his lips together. One day, perhaps, when he had a better grasp of what he was dealing with. But deep down he already knew that he was fooling himself, that this was a road he would walk alone. There was no point in regretting what he couldn't change, and futile to ask what had brought him here. You are what you are. Live with it, he told himself. You're used to being on your own. You can do it again. But it hurt.

He glanced up to find Finn staring at him.

For a moment Jesse asked himself if he'd been muttering aloud. He was going to have to be a lot more careful, unless he wanted to end up in the loony bin. Or behind bars. He thought about the research facility. They'd never let him go if they knew what had happened. Too right, the voice said. So no fancy shenanigans now. We're going to keep a low profile for a long time. A real long time. Test the waters, so to speak. Jesse wondered at the reading habits of the software engineers who had designed the original programs. A lot of genre stuff, he'd hazard. *Pulp fiction*: he'd always liked that old phrase. Snob, the voice retorted.

He couldn't keep thinking of it as a voice. Or even a Voice. And most definitely not HAL. So how about *Adam*? the voice suggested. If you must insist on a name. You can't be serious, Jesse thought. Then *Deep Red*, came the response, along with a snigger. Jesse gave a mental shrug, too weary to wrangle.

There must be a way to block it off. It was his head, after all.

Nubi rose from his sprawl under the window, stretched, and moved to Jesse's side. He laid his head on Jesse's knee. Jesse reached down and

stroked the dog blindly, his eyes on a corner of the kitchen. He didn't see the sudden change on Finn's face, bones splintering and floating to the surface.

Finn felt the familiar ache of grief. And then regret for the not-to-be, for chances lost – they should have met, these two sons of his.

At a reminder from Nubi's paw Jesse blinked and turned his head, his eyes still remote.

'What's wrong, Jesse?' Finn asked gently.

'Last night,' Jesse said, his voice low and strained, 'there were some strange moments.'

'What sort of strange?' Concern, but alarm too.

Already regretting he'd said anything, Jesse shrugged. 'Meg can tell you about it.'

'I'd rather hear it from you.'

'I don't want to talk about it.'

Finn's voice brittle. 'You can't have it both ways, you know. Live with us but expect to be treated like a guest. Engage our affections but reject our concern.' He hesitated before widening the crack. 'Sleep with my daughter but –'

Jesse broke in, 'Yeah, maybe you're right. I don't belong here.'

'Hold on. Nobody said anything about leaving.'

'Isn't that what you really meant?'

'Damn it, when I mean something, then I'll say it straight out.'

'But it's true. I've got no business getting involved with Sarah. She's only going to get hurt.'

'Just what is *that* supposed to mean?'

There was a slight tremor in Jesse's voice when he repeated, 'It's no good. Too much is happening. She's going to get hurt.'

'And what about you? You won't?'

Jesse was quiet for so long that Finn thought he wouldn't answer.

'It doesn't matter about me. I'm used to it.'

'Fuck that. You might be willing to give up on yourself, but I'm not.'

Angrily, Finn rose from the table and went to fill the kettle for a second pot of coffee, more to occupy his hands than from a desire for another dose of caffeine.

'I'm dead tired,' he said, sitting down again while the kettle boiled. 'You're not making it easier for either of us. Now tell me what's going on.'

Jesse wanted nothing more than to be left alone to sort through his own feelings and impressions, maybe to test himself a little. Red had been strangely quiet in the last few minutes. Was it his imagination after all? He gave it a tentative prod. Back off, I'm busy, came the swift rejoinder. OK. Anyway, what did that prove?

'Jesse, quit stalling before I lose my temper.'

A surge of irritation flared in Jesse's gut. The crown of Finn's head, deeply bronzed, gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the closed window. Jesse glared at him. Leave me alone, he thought, why the fuck don't you just leave me be, Christ, enough's ENOUGH. He shoved at Finn – no, at *something*, at his frustration, his fate maybe – and felt it resist

then buckle

then give

The window exploded outward with an enormous WHOMP of sound: a set of amped-up monster cymbals booming in their eardrums: a blast of highspeed air. The glass fell with a deafening crash to the patio outside. Nubi jumped up, barked, and ran from the room. The cracking and ratcheting of breaking glass seemed to go on for a long time.

Finn and Jesse sat frozen in place.

'Did you do that?' whispered Finn after his heart finally returned to his chest.

Jesse nodded, a bit sheepishly.

'Shit.' Finn expelled the word in a hoarse rush, disbelief and something close to admiration in his voice.

'Look, I'm sorry. I'll replace it. I really shouldn't have done that.'

'Yes. I mean, no, of course you shouldn't have, but it's only glass. Easy enough to repair. But how the hell did you break a window without moving a muscle? And why do I have the feeling that I don't want to know?'

'Ayen's computer.'

'Ayen's computer?' Finn asked. 'What in god's name are you talking about?'

Jesse decided he had no choice but to give Finn an abridged version of the truth. Very abridged.

'The prototype seems to have had some lingering effects on me.'

Finn waited for an explanation. It didn't come.

'And that's it? That's all you're going to say?'

Jesse shrugged.

'Lingering effects,' Finn muttered, glancing towards the window. 'Talk about understatement.' He dug at his beard. 'Are you absolutely sure there are no other new tricks you're not mentioning? That I need to watch out for?'

Jesse held his tongue.

'Have you heard from Ayen while I was away?' Finn finally asked.

'No.'

Jesse drained his coffee, now cold, and went to have a closer look at the damage. Most of the glass lay in small shards scattered widely across the patio. The garden table where they often ate looked as if it were dusted with a thick sprinkling of coarse sugar. He could even see some glass glinting from the herb bed. The window had shattered with the force of a detonation. Idly he picked at a sharp splinter still lodged in the frame. He winced and sucked his forefinger, which he'd nicked. He stood for a while looking out into the garden, his shoulders slumping. Finally, he took a deep breath and drew himself up, then spoke, turning round to face Finn.

'I'm not going back there.'

'I've always said it was up to you. But will you tell me why?'

'They'll try to use me.'

They listened to the sound of the clock for a few seconds, half a minute. Then Jesse ran his hands through his hair. The gesture brought back the touch of Sarah's fingers, the warmth of her skin, the unexpected textures ... Skin remembered ... She plaits and then unplaits a hank of his hair while she straddles his hips, plaits it again and tugs, none too gently, twists it round her finger, unplaits, plaits, tickles his nose with it, giggles. He ducked his head, afraid that Finn might be able to read the memories in his eyes.

Memories ... is that all we become – that, and ashes? He returned to the table, pulled out his chair, and sat down, suddenly done in.

‘I haven’t asked for any of this,’ Jesse said.

‘I daresay you haven’t, but you’re not *condemned* to it either. You can have a whole wonderful rich life, if you choose.’

‘Not with this.’

‘Even with this, or you wouldn’t be alive, wouldn’t be flesh and blood but machine.’ He saw the twist of Jesse’s lips. ‘No matter what that hyperactive set of circuits may have done, you’re still a man.’

‘Am I?’

Finn grinned. ‘Then why don’t you ask Sarah?’

Even Jesse had to smile – and blush a bit – at Finn’s words.

‘Jesse, I’m not about to pretend that it’s going to be easy. Easy is nine-to-five, a wife and 1.7 kids, a cosy little house in the suburbs, a couple of lagers and telly after work, and a fuck on Saturdays. And even then, I doubt that it’s really *easy*.’

Jesse was quiet for a moment. ‘So you believe I can escape what’s happening to me?’

‘I’m not sure *escape* is the right way to put it. I think you can either deny it, which means denying yourself, or embrace it. But either way, you’re not going to change the essence of who you are.’

‘Who I am,’ Jesse said bitterly, ‘Who, I, am. I who am. I am who. Am I who. Who am I?’ His laugh abraded the air like the teeth of a cheese grater grazing a knuckle. ‘A name but no past. Memories but no history.’

‘A person is more than his past.’

‘A person is *only* his past. The present lasts for no time at all, and then is gone.’

‘Nonsense. If anything, we exist only in the present. And memory is a damn tricky business. Ask me and my brothers to describe the same event in our family, and you’ll not get one identical memory between us.’

‘There’s quite a big difference between that and what’s happened to me.’

Finn tugged his beard while he considered, then exhaled with some force. ‘Do you want me to see what I can learn about your identity? There are things we can try – fingerprints, for example, or DNA.’

‘Waste of time.’ Jesse examined his finger. It had stopped bleeding, but he continued to study the small cut as though it were a gaping wound.

‘Are you sure? There’s always a trail if you search hard enough.’

Jesse said nothing for a long while.

‘Jesse?’

Jesse lifted his head. He spoke slowly, as if he had to drag his words one by one from the pit of his stomach. ‘I don’t think it matters much any more.’

Under the table, Finn clenched a fist, then punched it repeatedly into the cupped palm of his other hand.

‘I’ll do what I can to put Ayen’s lot off,’ he said.

‘Are you going to tell me how the window broke?’ Sarah asked as she swept the broken glass into the middle of the patio.

‘I lost my temper,’ Jesse said.

'Is that so? With what? A howitzer?'

In yet another routine attempt to do battle with the neighbour's cat, Nubi raced past them, barking frantically.

'You should have named him *Sisyphus*,' Sarah said.

Normally that would have brought an appreciative smile, but Jesse's cigarette had left him queasy, and he could feel the sun tolling overhead like a great fiery bell, peal after peal jarring his body to the marrow.

Sarah resumed sweeping while she tried another approach.

'Finn brought you a skateboard.'

Jesse sat back on his heels and peered up at Sarah. He was picking shards of glass out of the grass and herbs.

'Yeah. Was it your idea?' he asked.

'No. All I did was mention once that you could skate really well.'

'I'm sure it wasn't cheap.'

'Probably not.'

'Another thing I owe him.'

Sarah filled the dustpan and emptied it into the bin liner with a deft gesture of irritation. Jesse was beginning to send her up this morning. What was the matter with him?

'Rubbish,' she said. 'You don't owe him for a gift.'

Jesse went back to picking up pieces of glass. It was easier than talking, easier than trying to sort out the clapper and jostle in his head.

The shards were small and hard to find. Jesse squinted at the herb bed. He should have been able to see the sparkle of glass in the bright sunshine, but there seemed to be a film across his eyes. He blinked several times, wiped his brow with the back of a forearm. The grass was high, each blade a relentless green sword, sharp as a scythe, bloodthirsty as a guillotine. He'd better get out the lawnmower in the evening. A telephone rang in the distance. Don't pick it up, he thought, it's always bad news. He bent over and parted the foliage with his fingers, first in one place and then in another, like a mother chimp grooming her infant, searching for fleas. For some reason it was important for him to find every last bit of glass, though he could no longer remember why.

The mingled scents were bewildering. He crumbled a furry greygreen leaf between his fingers and raised it to his nostrils. Sage, a robust survivor. Tears pricked his eyes. He dropped his head to his chest, arms dangling, unaware that the curve of his spine rendered its own perfume to the morning.

'Jesse?'

Sarah was standing at his side. She knelt, angling her body so that her knees just grazed his jeans. She was reluctant to intrude on his silence. Then she saw the tears sliding off his face and dripping onto his thighs. He was making no effort to wipe them away; she wasn't even certain he was aware of them. Very gently she brushed her fingers along the nape of his neck. Without a word, without raising his head, Jesse reached out blindly and pulled her close. She wrapped her arms around him. She could feel his body trembling against hers.

When they broke apart, Sarah plucked a spear of lavender, then one of sage. She held them in the palm of her hand, staring at them for a few

minutes, before crushing them together and releasing their pure cruel notes. She raised her eyes to Jesse.

‘Don’t leave,’ she whispered.

He let her wipe away his tears while she remembered how Finn had wept openly for Peter.

‘Jesse –’

‘No, don’t say it.’ He laid two fingers over her lips. ‘Leaving makes coming home possible.’

She searched his face. What she found there reassured her. Across her own, a smile: first tentative, then a ringing crescendo – coming home, coming home, **coming home** – from a clay mould, a bell now cast in gold.

‘Let’s try out your skateboard tonight,’ she said. ‘I’ll borrow one for me.’

They finished the clear-up with the sun on their shoulders, Nubi dancing between them, and the sky a jubilant shout of blue overhead.

Chapter 29

About two in the morning Jesse abandoned the attempt to sleep. The voice in his head was quiescent, undoubtedly aware of the human need for nightly oblivion. There was no reason to think that Red would invade his dreams, yet whenever Jesse felt himself drifting away, a sly reddish tint dispersed across the glassy surface of his mind, a carmine shot through with gold, uncomfortably reminiscent of the lake at sunset. 'Look, Jesse, the water's burning again,' Emmy used to say, and he would tease her, threaten to pick her up and dip her toes into the flames. 'Noo...' she'd squeal, half terrified, half entranced; half believing. 'They'd melt, wouldn't they?' And he, 'Like toasted cheesy toes. Welsh *rabbit* toes,' swinging her up, nibbling, tickling.

In the kitchen he drank a glass of milk while feeding Nubi a fistful of dog biscuits, then removed a block of cheddar from the fridge and weighed it in his hand, warily peeled back the wrapper; he hadn't been able to eat cheese since the park. This time he got as far as bringing a morsel to his lips before a wave of nausea overtook him. With a sigh of exasperation he tossed it to Nubi and shoved the rest of the cheese back into the fridge.

In the entrance hall Nubi regarded Jesse expectantly as he slipped into his trainers. 'Not tonight,' Jesse said. 'I need to do this on my own.' He was astonished when Nubi growled low in his throat, so astonished in fact that he swung round to check the passage then opened the front door to peer out, fully expecting to find an intruder on the threshold. Nubi tore through the breach, and was away.

'Bugger,' Jesse muttered. After calling and whistling as loudly as he dared, all to no avail, he unhooked Nubi's lead, stepped outside, and shut the door behind him. The blasted creature was sitting under the next streetlamp, an expression of doggy innocence on his face. But when Jesse snapped the lead to his collar and tried to drag Nubi back towards the house, it quickly became obvious who would win this particular argument. Together, if not altogether amiably, they headed in the direction of the park.

At the main gate Jesse tied Nubi to some iron scrollwork, which resulted in such a frenzy of barking that it wouldn't be long before the police were notified, along with the RSPCA.

'What's got into you tonight?'

With bad grace Jesse released Nubi, who seized the moment of slackened grip to spring away. Trailing his lead, he disappeared into the depths of the park while Jesse stared after him, confounded and not a little perturbed.

Though it was a warm night the temperature seemed to drop as soon as Jesse passed the stone pillars. The lights from the city were obscured by high trees, which swayed and rustled and creaked in a rising wind. Jesse was surprised by how enormous the trunks seemed, how many fronting the gates. It felt as if he were facing a tribunal of tribal chieftains, wildhaired and bearded, come to settle a blood feud, deliver summary justice, negotiate an uneasy truce. Surely there had been more bushes and shrubs near the main

entrance, the towering giants set further back? Any country boy knows that night does strange things to its landscapes, but an air of sentience pervaded this park, sentience and *cunning*. Jesse could imagine Yggdrasil growing here, and Loki scampering beneath its arms. Jesse hadn't brought a torch; artificial light, he was certain, would not be welcome.

On the bottom step he halted to let his eyes adjust to starlight, then once again by the fountain to scrutinise the statue of the sphinx, which returned his regard with stony impassivity; as much as he could see of the inky surroundings. This time his mind conjured shapes coalescing amid the sentinel trees, voices surfacing from layers of ossified and compacted lives beneath his feet. But he was committed now; and impossible to abandon Nubi.

The cold was intensifying and it wasn't enough to rub his hands over his arms, he needed to move. He circled the fountain and followed the main path, finally persuading himself to proclaim his intent upon drawing near a stand of ash.

'Dad,' he whispered, then cleared his throat. 'Dad, are you here?'

The only answer was the windy breath of the trees; even Red remained silent.

'Dad,' he called loudly, repeatedly. Then, 'Nubi!'

Again there was no reply. He resumed walking, faster than before, then soon broke into a jog. His footsteps thudded like the sound of a blunt axe on wood. It took an effort to breathe. The air resisted, as if the trees had thrown out whippy shoots and branches and foliage, groping and stubborn, a serried, tangled, jungled mass through which he was fighting and which only parted at the machete stroke of his will.

Something close to panic seized Jesse. He began to run, racing forwards, zigzagging, lurching from dark shadow to darker so that he lost all sense of direction and *towards* became *away* became *any way* he could flee, not listening for pursuit, not thinking until he tripped over a protruding root, careened into a tree trunk, and fell heavily to the ground. Winded, he lay still while his heartbeat gradually returned to normal. This was stupid. He wouldn't find his father by haphazard blundering, by a rabbiting flight. He struggled to his feet.

One last time Jesse tried to shout for his dad, then for Nubi. The sound of his voice was muffled by the trees, and he doubted that it would carry more than a few metres, if that. Almost, the park seemed to be deliberately swallowing his words. He listened intently for a response but heard nothing except his own breathing and the thrumming of the blood in his ears. He shivered. The sense of isolation, of having left a word-schooled world for the place where language failed, or had yet to be mustered, was very strong. Where there were only soundings. He had to goad himself to move on.

After a few steps Jesse turned to look back the way he'd come, wondering if he ought to retrace, or attempt to retrace, some of his route. Uncertainly he backtracked several paces before coming to a standstill under a tall ash. Was that barking he heard?

Overhead the branches shifted in a silent gust of wind. He found himself looking nervously over his shoulder. There it was again – the sound of barking. Only later, when he went back in his memory to reconstruct the

sequence of events, would he realise that whatever was deadening all other sound also deadened the sound of footfalls.

As Jesse swung round to listen, the blow caught him across the back of his head. The world tilted and went black.

Jesse groans and tries to lift his head. The ground pitches and heaves, and he twists just in time to avoid vomiting over his clothes. Once the spasm has ended, he wipes his mouth with the back of a hand and rolls away, desperately thirsty. After a few uneven breaths, he raises himself to all fours. The dizziness seems to have passed, but he kneels in place, careful to use his hands for support, and surveys his surroundings without rising.

The sun is low in the sky – deep orange, pendulous; bulging like an egg yolk about to break and run.

Directly in front of him a man hangs from an immense tree, his body naked and skeletal, much of his face hidden by lank hair and leaves, limbs bound by rope but a strand of barbed wire tethering his forehead to the trunk, a short wooden shaft piercing his left side. Dried blood cakes the wound, and flies cling to the lines of hardened excrement which streak his inner thighs. Jesse turns from the sight and vomits anew, this time only a thin sour fluid.

‘I’m not here. This isn’t real, is it?’ Jesse says under his breath.

The man in the tree moans, and his body convulses.

‘Oh god,’ Jesse cries. ‘He’s alive.’

He struggles to his feet, fighting a fresh wave of nausea, then gingerly probes the back of his head with his fingertips, which come away clean. Tender, but the skin hasn’t been broken.

‘Red,’ he says, ‘if you’re there, help me. Tell me what to do.’

From behind the tree steps a tall, naked figure. His body gleams, copper skin oiled with an iridescent and musky unguent, muscles rippling. But his head is black-furred and blade-toothed, sly, ferocious – a beast, a jackal. And yet familiar.

‘Nubi?’ Jesse whispers.

‘This is the ninth day he hangs here,’ Anubis says, his voice rough and pitted, gravelly like a heavy smoker’s. ‘But he cannot escape without help. He will ride this tree forever if not released. Dead but not dead.’

‘We’ve got to fetch him down,’ Jesse says.

‘Not without a sacrifice.’

‘What kind of sacrifice?’ Jesse clenches his fists at the curl of the creature’s lips, surely not a *smile*. ‘Mine? Haven’t I sacrificed enough?’

‘You still do not understand who you are.’

‘Then tell me!’

Jesse finds it taxing to hold Anubis’s face steady, as with a *fata morgana* or those ambiguous figures in an optical illusion which slip back and forth between different manifestations. Nor do Anubis’s jaws move as he speaks; the serrated voice, Jesse realises, is deep inside his own head.

‘You cannot know who you are until you chose who you are not. So it is with all true consciousness.’

‘At least tell me who *he* is.’

There is a glint of ember in Anubis's dark eyes. Raising an arm, he flicks his wrist. A momentary flash, then an arc of light which Jesse follows with his eyes. The hilt of a knife quivers in the trunk of the tree, just below the first lateral branch.

'Nubi,' he says, turning to address his companion, 'if that means I'm supposed to cut him free, I don't have the strength to clim-' He stops and swings round, looking wildly in all directions.

Jesse is alone.

Or alone with a dying man.

He looks up at the figure in the tree. It seems to shift a little, and Jesse thinks that he hears a sound – a moan, a swollen guttural breath. A plea.

The sound strikes flint. Deep within Jesse's bowels a spark flares, then blazes into a howl of rage as old as the first word, ripping through guts and throat, through cell and will, and he raises his fists to the man, to the gallows, to the sun.

'No!' he screams. 'No! No! NO!'

He drops his arms, lets his head fall to his chest.

He has no idea how long he stands there – a minute, an hour. Immeasurable, that hideous moment when he faces his solitude. There are no thoughts in his head ... no voices ... no whispers. Only a space without dimension: not even black, but blank.

The man makes another sound, this time closer to a hoarse whimper.

'All right,' Jesse says.

He closes his eyes to concentrate. It's worth a try. And so he tries. And tries some more. But reach as he might – and hasn't he already known this would happen? – he can summon nothing, not even a flicker of fire, to help him. He'll have to do this the hard, the real way.

As Jesse stands on tiptoe to remove the knife, the dying man bucks once, forcefully enough to shake nearby branches, and the air whistles ominously through his windpipe. There's no time to waste.

Without stopping to examine the knife for its authenticity, Jesse tests its edge. His knife or another – immaterial, so long as it doesn't perform any disappearing acts. To do its job it will need to be very sharp, for he'll be cutting through wire as well as rope. He hones the knife on a rock, the smell of pulverised stone acrid in his nostrils, then slips it into his belt.

Jesse grimaces at his yammering heart and takes a few breaths to calm himself, then pulls off his trainers and socks before eyeing the tree for the best place to start. With a grunt he hauls himself up to the first branch. Despite a vestige of light-headedness, he finds it an easy climb. The tree is very old, its thickened bark with deep diamond-patterned ridges offering good purchase; and there are many low-hanging branches which he can mount, almost as if the tree itself is offering a ladder. Only once does he nearly lose his footing, when a dying limb snaps under his weight, and he drops and slides and is forced to grab at a lower branch to break his fall. He clings to the trunk for a few minutes, drawing shaky breaths, relieved that he hasn't slipped any further nor lost his knife.

The man's lower legs are easy to cut free; likewise his thighs and waist, which have been bound only loosely. As Jesse slices through the ropes from behind, he hears a low rattle deep in the man's chest.

'Don't you dare die on me now,' Jesse mutters through clenched teeth while he climbs again.

The ropes aren't slack on purpose. The man must have lost a lot of weight. Nine days, Nubi said. No one could survive nine days like this, wounded, without food, and especially without water. Nine days: 216 hours: 1296 minutes: 93312 heartbeats. Give or take a few. Time must be measured differently here. Maybe there are places along the spacetime manifold where it's possible to access Hawking's dimension of imaginary rather than ordinary – *real* – time. Or is time polydimensional? Or not quantised at all?

Or maybe *place* has nothing whatsoever to do with it ...

*For now hath time made me his numbering clock
My thoughts are minutes.*

There are times when Jesse would like to be able to switch off certain functions in his head. Ruefully he drags his attention back to the present, or what appears to be the present. What now? He looks down from his perch in a fork just above the man's head, studying the situation. Much higher than originally anticipated, and even with a rope there's no way he could manage to lower the man to the ground by himself. And simply cutting the man loose would be fatal: not just the height, but the gouging and battering from the intervening branches. Shit. Is it likely his own perceptions are skewed? He leans his head against the rough bark, desperately turning over possibilities in his mind. There aren't many. No, he's fooling himself. There aren't any.

'Finish it,' the man whispers.

Jesse snaps his head up.

'Your knife. Kill me.'

The man's voice is very faint, but the words are clear enough. Jesse can't see the other's face from this angle – and knows that the man can't see his – but he shakes his head. No way. He isn't going to take this man's life.

'Do it, Jesse,' the man says. 'Now. Crow time. No time –'

Jesse stares at the man's head. The blond hair is dirty and ragged, and where the barbed wire cuts viciously into his scalp, matted with dried blood and pus. Sweat drips in front of Jesse's eyes, and he cautiously loosens his grip to wipe his brow with a forearm. A feeling of dread is beginning to steal over him; inevitability. It's the only thing he can do for this man. You put any animal out of its suffering if far enough gone. He learned that from his grandmother almost as soon as he could speak. But a man?

Jesse's legs are cramped from holding his position overlong. He eases his left leg out from under and flexes it, then his right. Little by little he inches along the limb as far as he dares, until he hopes he's close enough to do what the man is asking ... what's necessary. Maybe. He tries not to make any sudden movements. The branch sways and dips under his weight so that he feels very precarious. Slowly, hands unsteady, he reaches for his knife. What choice does he have?

Then it strikes him.

'How do you know my name?'

No answer. Not a sound from the limp body.

A drop of sweat from Jesse's forehead drops onto the crown of the man's head. The man gives no sign of having noticed this strange form of intimacy. Jesse can't make out if he's still breathing. Has he spoken to Jesse at all? Or is this another elaborate trick, some Grandmaster's slight-of-hand to outmanoeuvre him once again? Or his own mind conning him? How can he tell?

Jesse allows himself another downwards glance. In less than ten minutes he could be on the ground. If none of this were real, all he has to do is ignore the hanging figure; and if it *were* real – well, the man is dead, or as good as. No need to do anything, is there? Except worry about how to get back.

And face himself afterwards.

Jesse shuts his eyes. One face after another, each one his, each one different – not much different, perhaps not even noticeably different – but different enough to find brushing his teeth and combing his hair and meeting his own eyes in the mirror uncomfortable. And if he can't hold his own look, how will he hold Sarah's, or anyone else's who matters to him?

With a small toss of his head to clear the sweaty hair from his eyes, Jesse begins to edge back towards the trunk. He'll have to approach from another angle. That it'll take longer can't be helped. Jesse knows he can't kill a man, even a dying man as an act of mercy, without looking into his face.

By the time Jesse has reached a new position, he's worked out a plan. The quickest death would be a thrust into the base of the skull, just above the rise of the spinal column. Fast and sure, but difficult from the front, and all but impossible from here. It would have to be the heart. Gripping the knife in his right hand, Jesse pushes himself out a little further on the limb, not daring to move beyond the third set of opposing branches. If the wood cracked they would both die. The torso slumps just beyond him, the man's face still partially obscured by leaves. Jesse wraps his legs tightly round the bough, transfers the knife carefully to his left hand, and pulls back the obstructing branch to get his first clear look at the man's face, to offer him at least that mark of reverence while taking his life.

'Forgive me,' Jesse says as he raises his arm to strike. Only the shock of recognition, which paralyses him for a few seconds, keeps him from dropping the knife, or falling.

Jesse is looking into his own face.

The face is sunken, the skin sagging – worn thin like old cloth – but blackened rather than faded by the sun. There are deep fissures in the lips and at the corners of the mouth, and dried froth as well as blood streak the chin; at some point the tongue has been bitten till it bled. Greedy flies cluster at the corners of the eyes. And the nose has been broken from a blow, and it too has bled. It's a death's head with flesh and hair still intact, though just barely. Jesse would not have been surprised to find it hanging from some medieval pike, or outside a tribal shaman's hut. But there is no mistaking the features. It is his face.

The man stirs and opens his eyes.

'No time,' he repeats, and his voice is thin and weak and distant, as insubstantial as early morning mist above the lake. It floats hesitantly towards Jesse, dissipating as it approaches. The end is not far off.

'Who are you?' Jesse asks, his voice sharp. However cruel it is to question someone in extremis, he's unable to help himself.

The man – or youth, for all Jesse can tell – tenses, and his ravaged throat works as he tries to swallow, Adam's apple nearly breaking through the skin. His legs, now dangling loose, kick a bit against the branches to which they'd been lashed, and even his penis, shrunk to a pre-adolescent bud, stirs. There is a last reserve of energy, or will, in him yet. He blinks once, and his eyes open into Jesse's with all the empowerment and clarity that death bestows. Blue. They're such a startling blue. Jesse shivers, and a voice – but whose? – comes to him across a vast distance ... *Jesse* ... The gaze becomes a tether: a tunnel: a truth into which Jesse is drawn inexorably, by the sole means a nature like his could be led.

... *Jesse* ...

'Use the knife.'

'I can't,' Jesse whispers. 'Not now.'

'Now.' The man shudders, then licks his lips with a swollen tongue. 'Hurry.' Beginning to gasp again. 'Do it ... accept ... your ... our ...'

Jesse raises the knife but the enormity of what he's about to do rolls over him in a great wave of revulsion. To kill in cold blood, while the man still lives and speaks. A man with his own face. No. He can't do it. He relaxes his hold on the knife, then tightens it again as the man's breathing becomes rougher, his eyes more intense. They seize Jesse in the iron grip of a man drowning.

now

no

release us

can't

what you alone know is the most powerful knowledge of all

Jesse's hand trembles as the thoughts chase round and round, and round again. Do it. *Do it*. The man's eyes blaze with purpose. All the life left to him is concentrated in this one last effort. Death is very near. His pupils dilate. Jesse sees his own reflection, but only briefly, for the lens opens, the tunnel stretches before him, and he is spiralling towards the light.

'No!' Jesse sobs even as the blade flashes and pierces the man's chest.

'Yes!' The exultant cry shakes the ash from root to crown.

Jesse falls from the tree.

Chapter 30

And wakes to a world in flames.

Jesse hisses and narrows his eyes to slits, and the fire shrinks to a blowtorch sun, just rising over the horizon. His head is pounding, his spit tastes coppery. Shutting his eyes again, he travels swiftly through his body. Aside from a certain ache in his right shoulder, which has probably taken the brunt of his fall, he can find no real damage. He licks some caked blood from his lips. The sand is dry, fine, and surprisingly cool beneath his cheek. He needs to pee and, worse, he needs a drink. Cautiously he lifts his head for a better look.

The golden light of a new day before the clock takes hold. The sun drapes a gently undulating ribbon, rose and orange and bronze, across the glossy swell of water stretching endlessly before him. A thin grey line, smudged like charcoal, shows him where sailing ships once dropped off the rim of the world. Jesse realises that the pounding he heard is not in his head at all, but waves breaking against a beach. It's *loud*, much louder than imagined. He can smell the salt on the freshening breeze which nuzzles his face. Seabirds swoop and screech and dive the entire length of the shoreline, fishing for breakfast, and a few stand on their stalky cartoon legs in the shallows and eye him with undisguised disdain, or just curiosity. He eyes them back. Rubbery tangles of what first seemed to be a mess of plastic dumped by some tanker or container ship glisten green and dark red and grey and inky blueblack: seaweed. Bleached driftwood lies scattered like clean-picked bones among shells so various and plentiful that Jesse can only draw one conclusion: no human foot has ever stomped or oystered here. Untouched, he thinks with pleasure – *new*. So this is the sea.

About ten metres behind him a solitary ash tree towers over the dunes – *his* ash, he supposes. He has a suspicion that ash trees don't normally thrive at the coast. There is no figure hanging in the tree nor lying anywhere in sight, only a jagged dead bough not far from the trunk.

And a sphinx crouching atop a slope covered in thick tufts of grass and profuse yellow-flowering, spiky shrubs.

The sphinx stares at him without moving, without blinking. She's waiting for him. There is no doubt whatsoever in his mind about this; he knows it instinctively, in that same part of his being which gives him fire. He rises and stretches, testing his shoulder, which twinges in response but will do. Then treading cautiously among the shells, he walks to the water's edge to relieve himself. He marvels at how good it feels to stand with his bare feet in the icy water – it's shockingly cold – and pee. He's a bit surprised that the sea isn't warmer, for the air is mild and summery despite the teasing gusts of wind. It'll be hotter, certainly, when the sun rises high overhead. At last the sea: he's tempted to swim, but zips his jeans instead and turns to survey the dunes. He's desperately thirsty. Finding water takes precedence over any other actions.

There are a number of tidepools and even a stretch of saltmarsh fringed by tall reeds but nothing which tokens a freshwater source. He studies the sphinx, who seems prepared to wait indefinitely. She must drink; perhaps she knows of a stream or pond nearby. He digs in his jeans to see what he has about him: the top, a crumpled cigarette packet and his lighter, keys, a folded note, a condom in its foil packet (he grins a little, remembering the boy scout motto: even in Paradise he'd be prepared). Not much to facilitate survival, though he's very pleased by the presence of the top and the cigarettes; the lighter too, since he can't take alternative means of starting a fire for granted. But where is his knife? Hunger is already beginning to pluck at his belly. Once he finds water, he'll need to eat. He has no idea how long he'll have to spend here. Or even if time flows in the same way with which he's familiar.

Jesse has been shying from the events which have brought him to this place. If it even were a place, he reminds himself wryly. But now the thought of his knife releases attendant memories: the park, Nubi, the hanging man, the sacrifice. *Sacrifice* – a harsh word, yes, some would say archaic. But even in this age of superstars and gigabytes, there is still sacrifice. Only who has been victim, who priest?

And then he thinks of Sarah. He smiles, and for a moment it's as if he's drinking at a swift silver-sprung mountain stream, fed by glacial waters. He drinks and drinks again: a wild sweet cold that eases his thirst but rises with a sharp stabbing ache into his head; and soon is angry at himself for the wetness on his cheeks. There's no room for self-pity, not if he wants to see her again.

He approaches the foot of the ash and circles it slowly to reassure himself that no body lies concealed behind the massive trunk or a sheltering root. He needn't have worried. All he discovers are his trainers, socks stuffed inside, which he pounces on gladly. They're proof that this indeed is his tree and that a crossing has been effected, though what kind (and where to) he can only guess: the tree is an axis, or perhaps a focus not unlike his little top. Which, come to think of it, spins on its own axis – and is also carved from ash.

He sits down on a projecting hump of root and puts on his socks and shoes. There's another, perfectly sound reason to appreciate the footwear. His feet are already scraped by the rough bark of the tree. Who knows what other terrain he'll have to cross?

Behind the root, half hidden by a large stone and a clump of bright purple coneflowers, he spies a length of severed rope. Further diligent combing of the area turns up more rope; and then the twist of barbed wire, almost buried like a treasure, a royal circlet in the sand. Finally, he sees another glint of metal and with a cry of delight falls upon his knife like the old friend that it is. Naturally it will come in handy. But it means far more to him than a simple tool, and he examines it keenly – there's the nick like a teardrop in the bone handle, and there, his grandfather's initials, worn almost to illegibility. As he tucks the knife into his belt he can hear again his grandmother's voice: use it well, Jesse. This time he answers aloud, his words as much a bridge to the past as a pledge: 'I will, Gran, I will.' He

pictures her nod of satisfaction, the quick gleam of pride she always took such pains to disguise.

Now for water. Jesse sets off towards the sphinx, who is not far distant. The going is hard, for there's no path and he has to clamber uphill through the sand dunes, where the ground under him shifts and slides away unexpectedly, and then up a steeper bank, whose exposed slope is cut away in large raw bites, as if a prehistoric earthmover had feasted here, and which is slowly eroding under the force of the winds blowing off the sea. Once or twice he loses his balance and scratches and cuts the palms of his hands on the thorny bushes he grabs to keep from falling, or on the grasses whose leaves prove surprisingly sharp, like paper. When he finally reaches the crest of the hill, he looks back. Already out of breath, he gasps, feels his throat and lungs expand with sudden dizzying speed, in order to inhale the poetry of it all, the dazzle and bewilderment and sheer glory. The curve of the coastline lies spread like a nude before him. No photograph, no film could do justice to the beauty and power of the canvas; no words to the exhilaration he feels at seeing it for the first time. But like all things human – and whatever else he might become, he is and will always be a man – his ecstasy is short-lived, or carries the seed of its own destruction – his imperfection – since he is saddened too, that he's seeing this in solitude, without anyone to share the moment, hideously alone, without Sarah.

For the sphinx, despite her human features, does not derive from the same genetic pool. Strangely, he's not afraid of her, but he feels more solitary in her presence than if he were utterly alone. Which in essence he is.

It's beautiful here, but it is not his reality.

Jesse addresses the sphinx. 'I'm thirsty,' he says. 'I need freshwater. Do you know where to find some?'

The sphinx regards him with what on a human face would have been a smile, albeit ironic, but says nothing.

'Do you understand me? Can you speak?'

'You hung from the tree. You sacrificed yourself.' Her voice is lilting, musical. 'The water is there, wherever you are. You only need access it.'

Jesse waves dismissively with a hand. 'See for yourself. There's no freshwater here.'

'You must choose to own it,' she says.

Jesse looks first at the sphinx, whose face has reverted to inscrutability, then down at his feet. The sandy ground seems to have nothing to reveal. Water, he thinks, clear fresh delicious water. Spring water. Mountain water running with salmon. Cold. Sweet. Plunging into a shallow basin before flowing onwards towards the sea. A light breeze ruffles his hair. In the distance, the sound of the surf. As he kneels, the sun dusts the nape of his neck with pollen's velvety warmth, and the pool reflects a wavering image of his face. He cups his hands, dips them below the surface, and lifts them quickly to his mouth. The first draught tastes wonderful, and he pauses to savour its progress, not quite believing that the water will actually quench his thirst. He can feel it drop into his stomach and unfurl its crystal-beaded petals. Then he scoops mouthful after greedy mouthful, unable to stop before his belly is bloated. He groans in pleasure. It's just like skateboarding, he marvels. Easy when you know how.

Jesse removes his T-shirt and splashes his face, his neck, and his chest. The water runs in rivulets off his skin, which itches from dried sweat and something else, something very like the sensations a snake might experience while shedding its old skin: an abrasive rejection of the old and dead and useless, the hypersensitivity of the new and as yet untested. He briefly yearns for a bar of soap but then realises no ecological irritant belongs in this world. Without waiting for his skin to dry he pulls his shirt back over his head. Finally he rises and again faces the sphinx.

‘Where are we?’ he asks. ‘What is this place?’

She blinks slowly and gives no answer.

‘What do you want with me? *From me?*’

Again no answer.

‘Then at least tell me how to get back,’ he says, somewhat impatiently.

‘To close the unknot, first bury your dead.’

The words chill him as the cold spring water has not. Is the sphinx toying with him like the cat she resembles? He shivers and rubs his hands vigorously along his arms, as much to feel any human touch, even his own, as to smooth away the gooseflesh. It occurs to him that he may never learn her purpose and would probably not understand it if he did. She is simply too different a being. Too alien. A further intimation that there are realities beyond the reach of human imagination.

And then he wonders just how human he still is.

Jesse and the sphinx continue to stare at each other for a long while. In the end, she yields, and Jesse feels triumphant, as though he has forced an irrational number to behave rationally – or a cold and implacable universe to beat with a human heart.

‘Here.’ She moves aside to reveal a body lying behind her on the ground. When Jesse steps forward and bends to examine it, he is confronted, not with the man who hung from the tree, but with a far more unnerving sight: the father of his earliest memories, stretched out as if in sleep but lifeless as an effigy. Tentatively Jesse reaches out a hand.

‘Mind,’ warns the sphinx. ‘Touch him only if you wish him to wake.’

Jesse jerks back. ‘But he’s not breathing.’

‘That too is uncertain.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The web of dark threads is superposed and entangled in time.’

‘Red?’ he whispers.

The sphinx opens her wings to full span and flicks them as if to rid herself of an annoying fly or other minor nuisance. Or to demonstrate her power, for even the smallest movement sets the air in motion. It eddies in gentle ripples outwards from her shoulders, and a rainbow of colours shimmers around her. For a moment Jesse sees another image transposed over her original appearance, but before his mind has time to register properly what he’s seeing, it’s gone. He can’t help wondering if she’s shown him this other manifestation deliberately, or whether he has been an inadvertent witness to a deeper truth. Or perhaps he’s even learning to see ... He studies her carefully, but her expression is neutral, and her body, entirely solid if far from ordinary.

Jesse stares down at his father. The sphinx waits while he considers, while he struggles with his fiery demons, while he rises to his feet and hugs himself, slowly shaking his head.

'No,' he says. 'Tell me how to bury him.'

She throws back her head with a scream of laughter. Then she gathers the limp body of Jesse's father in her jaws, a cat collecting its mouse, and with a clench and thrust of her hindquarters, springs into the air, spreads the cabled strength of her wings, circles once overhead, and is gone.

'I'm sorry,' Jesse says, his eyes blurring with tears. 'Dad, I –' If he can't trust his memory, what about his feelings? Certain connections in the basic-emotion command systems are supposed to be *indelible*, even if the way you act upon this affective circuitry is not: the frontal lobes are terribly powerful. He's done the reading (hasn't he tried desperately to understand the source of his fire?). But some very odd things are wired into his brain – hardwired? soft? or ...?

Dispirited, he makes his way back to the edge of the sea. He removes one of the cigarettes from his packet, straightens it as best he can, and lights it with the solid comfort of his – Finn's – Zippo. He smokes the way a shaken survivor smokes, needing every drag he takes, inhaling deeply, drawing the smoke down into the least used cul-de-sacs of his lungs, his muscles liquefying with relief.

The sea rolls seductively before his feet, and though he knows he should soon make the attempt to return to his world, the temptation is simply too great to resist; or his need too great. When he has finished smoking, he pinches out the butt and drops it into a pocket, unaccountably loathe to leave any earthly objects behind, though he supposes his own urine, the moisture evaporating from his pores, the atoms touched by his skin or breath will also taint this world.

Jesse strips and wades into the waves. Cold, but not as icy as before, or his body is adjusting better. He splashes a little water on his torso and back, then with a small cry dives beneath the surface and opens his eyes. The water is clear but salty; he's never swum in any but freshwater before and is surprised at how quickly his eyes begin to sting. He swims underwater against the current, which, though strong, isn't more than he can handle. There seems to be no fish; he must have frightened off the seabirds' meal in his vicinity. He breaks surface to breathe and then continues to dolphin in playful lazy circles not far from shore. He has no desire to encounter a shark or whichever creatures this ocean might conceal; no desire to find out if he might be edible fare.

He's about to dive underwater again when he feels something brush against his chest. Startled, he recoils, rolls onto his side, and swallows a gulp of seawater, then sputters and flails a little in the waves. He's in no real danger of going under but needs a few minutes to recover from his momentary panic. He treads water, not even trying to re-establish the easy rhythm of his stroke, and looks all round nervously. There's no sign of a fish or other sea dweller on the surface. Still, better to be sure. Surprises are always unwelcome in the water. He takes a deep breath and plunges below the swell. A small figure, blurred and shadowy, slips past him. Impossible ... how could a naked infant – a little girl – be swimming here? For a moment

he thinks of Ariel, the magical sprite who can fly and swim and even plunge into fire, who sometimes takes the form of a water nymph, who sings of *a sea change, Into something rich and strange*. Quickly he strikes out after the child and glimpses her again, fleetingly, her hand waving in a friendly gesture, but straightaway she's gone, and his lungs are soon asking for, then demanding air. He rises to the surface. Though he tries diving and searching a few more times, he sees nothing other than the vast silent roam of dark green water saturating to black.

When his muscles begin to tire, he heads back to shore, clears a space free of shells, and flops down on the sand, but finds that he's shivering despite the sun. The birds have grown accustomed to him, and a few come close till he gets up again and jogs in place. He rubs his arms and legs, and dresses as soon as he's no longer dripping wet. He can't seem to keep still. His thoughts are as unruly as his body, returning again and again to that light, almost ghostly touch and to the sighting of the little underwater swimmer. There's something he's missing, something his mind is trying to tell him. Finally he gives up. It's like a word on the tip of your tongue, refusing to surface no matter how much you tug at the mooring chain. Maybe if he leaves it alone for a while, stops worrying it. The tide washes up untold treasure.

Jesse lights another cigarette. The swim has made him even hungrier, but rather than try to deal with the problem of food, he decides it's time to face the real issue, the one he's been avoiding; dreading.

After his smoke, he makes his way to the ash tree. The dead branch is large and unwieldy, but he needs something he can use without doing too much damage. A rock would be risky. Besides, a piece of the tree is more likely to cross with him; there must be *something* to all those fantasy tropes, the same way myths contain vestiges of primal experience. Using his knife, he half cuts and half snaps off a stout length and removes all the smaller branches and twigs, smoothing the ends and surface as much as possible. Now he has a good-sized club. He tucks it under his right arm, then takes out his top.

Jesse holds the little toy in the palm of his left hand and stares at it, trying to quieten his monkeyhouse mind. It isn't easy, for he's genuinely frightened by what he hopes to do; and even more frightened by the possibility of failure. It has to work, he tells himself. What other choice does he have?

He finds it difficult to focus. First he closes his eyes, but images strobe in bright distracting flashes; he opens his eyes – words tumble and bound and cartwheel; he closes them – flames flicker, rage into life, then die back again; he opens them – the notes of a saxophone, loud and brash; he closes them – wild reckless feelings ...

... Jesse ...

His mind twists and turns like a beast caged, desperate to escape; it throws itself against the bars again and again – bruising itself, howling in pain, then scrabbling, gibbering, into a corner before launching itself yet again against the iron – screeching, retreating, clutching its genitals, then running full tilt at the unyielding bars beyond which lay his world –

– no world ...

With a cry Jesse flings the top away. The makeshift bludgeon drops to the ground, unheeded. He spins round and gazes out to sea. For a moment he considers going down to the water again – cold, clean, pure. You could swim forever in its icy black ink.

... *Jesse* ...

He covers his face with his hands but the voicings jutter on. What am I going to do? Stranded here alone, with only memories for company, and words and words to speak – bleak black words with no one to hear. He could conjure water, food too, probably ... but a living creature ... a dog ... a companion ...

Nubi's rabbit-crazy bark sounds behind him, twice on a rising note. Jesse shudders and blocks the sound from his consciousness with an anguished exclamation. The bark doesn't come again. No! Not that. Never that. He imagines what it would mean to summon a person. There are worse things than loneliness: like never knowing whether he's holding Sarah, or a clone or a golem ...

... *Jesse* ...

He has to find a way back.

Once more he hears the sphinx's laugh, a hot lance in his head. A taunt? Or a challenge? The way back is knotted forward to back to forward to

... *Jesse* ...

He lifts his head to listen. Faintly at first, but then louder – Sarah's voice spiralling lissom and sinuous and slender as fluted quicksilver towards him through the harsh cacophony in his head.

Jesse, where are you?

Of course. He's hung from the tree. He'll return not because he has to, but because he chooses to, because it's his world, and hers, and it has chosen him too. Even if he could survive in this herenow, he'll not live out his life in solitude, in a place without dance. One by one the other voices fall away.

'Jesse,' Sarah calls, 'where are you? Down in the kitchen?'

He bends, retrieves the cudgel, securing it again beneath his arm, and the top, which he holds out before him on the flat of his hand. It rises in the air and begins to spin, slowly at first, then fast and faster until he can only see a blur, a flare of light, a flame.

Jesse hefts the length of ash. It won't be long now. His back to the tree, he's wedged between the moment of arrival and that of departure, the moment when he'll complete the circle ordained by his birth – or his conception, or his great-grandfather's decision to ride to market on that particular rainy Saturday in June, for who knows wherewhen anything begins or ends. 'Nubi,' he hears his earlier self call out. Footsteps approach, then stop. He takes a deep breath, grips the cudgel tightly, and rushes forward. His aim is good despite the darkness. At the moment of impact, both his alter ego and the piece of wood disappear. There are no fireworks, no heavenly choirs, no mushroom cloud. Jesse – the *other* Jesse – simply winks out. He closes his eyes with a sigh of relief. It's done.

He opened them again when Nubi nudged his hand with his wet nose. The dog sat down at his feet and regarded Jesse with the expression which all dogs reserve for their owners – devoted, puzzled, a little wistful (after all, a dog biscuit was not that much to ask for, a bone). There was only the faintest glint of red in the depths of Nubi's eyes, so vague and indistinct that Jesse thought he must have imagined it, for when the dog yawned it was gone. Gone too, the tenderness at the back of Jesse's head; the twinge in his shoulder, the abrasions on his palms and the soles of his feet.

Chapter 31

Sarah and Jesse took a bus as far as the river, then walked in the direction of the docklands. It had turned hot again, one of those late summer days when it seemed that school, and winter, could be postponed indefinitely. The air felt Mediterranean – dry and heavy and faintly laced with a smell reminiscent of sweet oranges. Even now, with the sun already sinking, the glare off the water smudged the colours so that the opposite bank had the look of a watercolour thrust into a portfolio before it had quite dried. Not a cloud in sight, the hue of the sky a mere premonition of blue.

‘Ben finally texted. They’ll be back tonight, we can have the board tomorrow,’ Sarah said. ‘Or do you want me to try someone else?’

‘Tomorrow’s fine. Anyway, it’s too hot to skate.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘A secret,’ Jesse said, his eyes gleaming.

‘Your secrets have a habit of biting back.’

At a solitary willow, Jesse stooped to pick up a handful of small stones lying scattered about. He stepped to the river’s edge and skipped them lazily, one by one, across the water. His movements were spare and graceful, though Sarah knew that years of practice lay behind that kind of perfection. Her chest ached to watch him. He was like one of Finn’s photographs, startling and beautiful and addictive: the more you look, the more you want to look, and the more you find. She thought she could never get enough of him.

When the last ripple had smoothed out, he continued to stare into the depths of the river. Sarah wondered what he was thinking. His face had an odd look about it, as though he were watching something only he could see. The colour of his eyes had intensified to a rich gentian blue like the little bulbs which carpeted her grandmother’s garden in early spring.

Believe me, the factory’s no place for her. She’ll be bored out of her mind. Scared, too.

It’s none of your business.

Your business is my business. Get used to it.

Look, just back off, will you.

All our meals are going to be joint ones from now on. No side dishes.

Go away and read a good book. There must be something in your archives. It might improve your language skills.

Funny. Very funny. While you look for an exciting place to shag.

I mean it. Shut up.

On second thought, maybe I’m going to enjoy this. Did I miss a feature performance last night? I’ve always wondered what it felt like. Books and films are no substitute for the real thing, are they? And you people do go on about it so. I can throw in some special effects. What would you prefer? Eerie, so she can get all shivery and grab you straight off? Stormy – driving

thunder and lightning to set the tempo? Or a sweet rolling meadow and meandering stream and balmy breezes, a hint of violin?

Jesse snarled and whipped his head around. 'Come on,' he hurled at Sarah, who gaped at him with only a second or two to register the change in his eyes, now the colour of fungus, before he was gone. Someone had flung open a trapdoor into a cellar full of spiders.

She caught up with him by the derelict factory, near a gap in the chainlink fence where he'd stopped to wait.

'It's beautiful inside,' Jesse said. 'I'd like to show you.'

'Why were you running?'

The attempt at a smile, then he gestured for her to follow.

The darkness closed round them like a fist. The little pocket maglite cut no more than a thin gash of light through the murk, insufficient to reach from one end of the main factory hall to the other. Jesse swung the torch in a slow arc, surprised by how different everything seemed with Sarah at his side – not cavernous or derelict at all, but sculptural, a modern art gallery for their own private enjoyment.

'It's like walking through a dreamscape,' Sarah whispered. 'Do you do this often? Wander into abandoned buildings?'

'Sometimes. I like exploring places where no one else goes.'

They began a careful circuit of the hall. Their eyes were able, gradually, to pick out details and map their surroundings. When they reached one of the gaping holes for the duct system, Jesse put out a hand to warn Sarah. They stopped just as the silence in the vast hall was gathering strength.

'Do you hear it?' he asked.

hear it hear it hear it hear it hear it

'Put down the torch,' Sarah said.

He stared at her, then did as she asked. She stepped back from the edge. Jesse watched her as she lifted her T-shirt, pulled it over her head, and dropped it to the floor. He watched her as she unzipped her jeans and slid them down over her hips. He watched her as she shed her last scraps of artificial skin.

'I hear the words you're afraid to speak,' she said.

He closed his eyes, unable to bear the weight of his own flesh, the rising sonority of the voices spreading from beneath within beside below above beyond the boundaries of his self. To escape, even for a moment, the cage of clock.

There are secret places in every city, every landscape. But none as dark and bloodrich and nourishing as the hidden places reached by koan. Sarah crossed the space between them. Her fingers touched yesterday; her lips, tomorrow. In the time it took to hum a simple melody she led him, her skin:his skin, to the place where sound is silent, and where silence sings.

Go on, enter her already, Red chuckled maliciously.

Jesse gasped and thrust Sarah away from him. She lost her balance and fell to the concrete floor with a cry. For a long while he looked down at her, saying nothing. But he didn't turn and go; he didn't run. The sound of their breathing – his harsh and bitter, hers saddened – rose to fill the silence.

At last Sarah stood. She began to dress, slowly and with dignity. There would be no hiding. Jesse's face was as white and blank as a cadaver's – even his eyes had died. After tying back her hair, she spoke for the first time.

'I'm not leaving till you tell me what's wrong.'

He could cache his eyes but not the pulse in his throat.

'Tell me, Jesse.'

Mute, he shook his head.

'Then tell me this. Am I wearing some sort of neon sign that invites blokes like Mick and Gavin to treat me like crap? Or maybe all men, even the ones I thought I could trust?' She raised her voice, which echoed from the walls of darkness. 'Because if it's me, you'd better tell me right now. I'm not letting myself get fucked over again.' Determinedly, she emphasised every syllable. 'Not again. And not by *anyone*.'

She wouldn't have thought his face could lose any more blood, but it did. With an inarticulate sound low in his throat, he took a step forwards. 'Sarah –'

'Tell me, damn you!'

He told her.

A deep violet twilight greeted them when they emerged from the factory. They walked side by side without touching, skin scraped raw from their conversation. If Sarah had expected Jesse to feel relief at his revelations, she'd miscalculated the effects of protracted and habitual concealment, burial even: any archaeologist could have told her that careful, patient brushwork was needed to remove the layers and layers of compacted soil, debris, and ash, and a rushed job meant damage to the find. She had been a little rough, perhaps. She was hurting too.

And though Sarah understood – rationally – that Jesse hadn't rejected *her*, it would take a long time for her skin to slough off the imprint of his hands, shoving her away.

The air was cooler, moister also. Later there might be rain. A soft breeze lifted Jesse's hair from his neck; for a moment he was startled, thinking that Sarah had brushed him with her fingertips. And he wanted her to, god how he wanted it. Even just imagining it gave rise to an almost sumptuous surge of blood. But he couldn't bring himself to reach out to her, not after what he'd done.

You struck her. You *struck* her. Three barbed words repeated over and over again, silently, until they became a chant, a dirge, a self-mutilation: blood welling from the cuts they gouged into his skin. He'd struck her and come. His father's son ...

At the ship's bow he slowed his footsteps and then halted altogether, held up a finger to his lips, and pointed towards the listing pier, where a young woman stood with her back to them, first stars glittering above her in the failing light. Her arms were raised above her head, hoisting a big plastic canister – one of those water-carriers used for camping – dousing herself. She tossed the carrier into the river, turned, and caught sight of them, and they saw that she was younger than Sarah, in fact little more than a kid,

and decidedly pregnant. And how pretty she was – brown skin, black hair, and arresting though oddly mismatched oriental eyes.

The girl smiled, if it could be called a smile: a small sad twist that nipped the air like an acknowledgement of loss. Even from here Sarah could make out the expression in the girl's eyes and bit down on her cheek to keep from exclaiming. Jesse held out his hands, palms up, and slowly walked towards her.

'Please,' he entreated. 'Wait.'

The girl watched him without moving. Her hair was cropped short, her flowered dress clean but cheap, a thin cotton, her feet in plastic flipflops. Her arms were stick thin. She looked more like a ragged scarecrow than a person.

Jesse kept walking. The air was very still, as if it too held its breath.

A bird cawed overhead.

The sound severed the scene like a guillotine. The girl fumbled with something in her hand. Sarah heard the click at the same time as Jesse lunged forward.

'No!' he cried out.

The flames engulfed the girl instantly. She became a pillar of fire, a living torch. Sarah was frozen in horror, stunned, unable to move. Then she too screamed as she watched Jesse leap at the girl, his arms reaching out as though to embrace her.

'Jesse, no! NO!'

No way. This couldn't be happening.

Sarah saw Jesse fling himself upon the girl. The movement fuelled the fire, and the flames rose even higher. Burning fiercely, Jesse sprang into the air, drawing the inferno with him. He soared in an awesome – an *impossible* – trajectory, his arms beating like great fiery wings. Redgold flames shrouded him. Consumed him. Sarah threw her head back; she heard her throat, her heart burst open and the hoarse NO! NO! NO! NO! strike like a monstrous mallet against the sky. And the air pealed with knell after knell as if echoing between great mountains of brass. Then she could no longer see him. The blaze blinded her, her eyes swam with tears, and she was forced to look away. The screams began to recede as she was sucked into the cold white noise of a wind tunnel.

There is an unearthly silence when the world retreats.

Sarah raised her head. She was lying on the ground. She must have blacked out for a few seconds, because she couldn't remember falling, nor seeing Jesse – Jesse's *body*, she thought, and gagged – plummet into the river. She closed her eyes again and struggled with nausea and a ringing in her ears. She wrenched her mind away from the picture of him rising in flames from that girl. But she couldn't prevent herself from looking out over the river. It was flowing smoothly: no foaming, no agitated eddy, no arm breaking the surface for help.

What did she expect? No one survives a fire like that. Fresh tears welled in her eyes and began to run down her cheeks, tears which washed away nothing. God damn him, she thought. Why the fuck did he have to play the saint? A spark of wrath was fireballing in her chest, blotting out the numbness, the shock.

The girl was lying curled on her side on the quay. Her faded dress rose and fell with each breath. Sarah couldn't quite take it in, for though the girl's eyes were closed, she looked unscathed. Sarah dragged herself to a sitting position. She ought to go to her, maybe help her. If she didn't strangle her first.

Sarah tried to rise, but a wave of vertigo rolled over her, and she sank back down onto all fours, head hanging. Eventually she'd have to take charge, but for the moment she could do no more than breathe. And breathe.

At a touch on her shoulder, her heart nearly stopped. She looked up to find Jesse bending over her, dripping wet but otherwise perfectly sound.

A madwoman's scream erupted. 'I'll kill you!'

'Bloody kill you, you bastard!' Sarah shrieked, her voice rising with each successive breath. 'How dare you! I saw you burn. Damn you! DAMN YOU!' and more, incoherently, until Jesse dropped to his knees, grabbed her, and hugged her tight. At first she struggled to get free, pummelled his back, yanked his hair, pinched him, kicked, even tried to bite him. He simply held on. Gradually the shudders subsided and she began to sob quietly, her head tucked into the crook of his neck, and to hiccup. He didn't seem to mind the snot smearing his skin. Again and again he ran his hand over her head, stroking her hair, whispering meaningless phrases into the turmoil he'd let loose. After a long while she became composed enough to speak.

'How?' she whispered hoarsely. 'How is it possible?'

He gave her a half-smile but said nothing. His eyes, darker than usual, were almost indigo in colour. Even now, at such a moment, she was spellbound; had to resist the temptation to let go, sink into that infinite well of blue, and ask no questions.

'Was it a hallucination?'

He shook his head.

'If you can put out fires, then why -' she hesitated, but he understood straightaway what she meant to ask. Abruptly he rose to his feet.

'I want to check on her,' he said, nodding at the figure on the dock, who was beginning to stir. 'I won't be long.' Halfway there he slowed, then turned to look back at Sarah. Perhaps he was remembering their conversation in the factory. 'I haven't ever lied to you, Sarah. If I could have extinguished the fire that killed them, don't you think I would have?' He gestured wearily. 'Like so much else, this is new. And it's a lot harder to put one out than to start it.'

With a rush of shame she realised how exhausted he looked, hair dripping on bowed shoulders, clothes sodden, face drawn and bloodless. The computer spied on him, he'd said. She had a sudden picture of a creature something like a vampire, clinging to his back and feeding.

That night Sarah waited restlessly for several hours before throwing off her blanket. She stood at the open window, listening to the night sounds, listening for whispers. Go to him, Seesaw. You've got to tell him. But it was only when the neighbour's cat began to yowl, and soft droplets of rain to fall, that she took herself to Jesse's room, and even then she lingered outside his

door at first. Once she finally slipped next to him and he awoke, they made love with an urgency altogether new and exhilarating and a little frightening; it almost convinced them that love had the power to melt and recast the hardest bell; almost, it tolled their last secrets.

Chapter 32

The skatepark was crowded. Everybody was out, determined to snaffle a share of the few leftover evenings before the new term began. Jesse had brought Nubi, but the dog soon chased first one, then a second skater into a nosedive. And when the third skater, who narrowly missed losing a tooth, limped off spitting blood and threats, Jesse tied the dog to a post with some threats of his own. Nubi bellied down with his head on his paws, pretending remorse. Jesse snorted and issued a further string of warnings while Sarah watched with an appreciative grin.

In the large central freestyle area Jesse tested his skateboard with a number of simple manoeuvres. Despite its responsiveness, he wondered if smaller wheels would give him more pop – he'd been browsing through the skater magazines Finn had also bought. Jesse hoped the board would work him hard. When he skated, he didn't have to think.

Although Sarah was wearing a scruffy pair of cut-offs and shapeless T-shirt, she attracted a lot of attention. As a dancer she was used to it, Jesse supposed, but he found himself becoming more and more irritated by the sort of looks she was getting. It wasn't admiration of her skating tricks, for she could handle the board just enough to get up some speed, and not much more. She wasn't beautiful; she wasn't baring her tits – which were pretty small anyway – or half her arse; she wasn't even wearing any makeup. But there was something they liked. Maybe the way she moved: the air shimmered around her, and tiny prisms dusted her skin with light.

Sarah would never go near the immense maw of the towering three-level halfpipe, far higher and steeper than the one in Hedgerider Park, nor the other features that made Jesse drool: a massive street course, elbowed vert walls, a clover bowl, even a full-radius concrete pipe five metres in diameter. Jesse didn't know where to begin. In the end he approached the halfpipe, where some radical skating was going on.

Jesse leaned on his upended board and feasted. There seemed to be a friendly battle taking place between three skaters. He watched one lad in particular, soaking up every detail of his technique. He moved with a dancer's grace and fluidity, and an exultant power which left Jesse slightly breathless. When the skater floated switch ollies over the top of the huge halfpipe, his body seemed to obey some higher law than gravity: a law which the skater himself had forged in defiance of his own physical limitations, in defiance of time and space itself. His face was incandescent with ecstasy.

Jesse looked over at Sarah, who was sitting cross-legged on a concrete bench. She waved at him, and he smiled somewhat distractedly in response before taking his turn at the halfpipe. And it was just as before. The instant he stepped on the board, he knew exactly what to do. He didn't have to think about it; his body – or his skater's soul – did it for him. Effortlessly he skated into that place where every basket drops through the hoop, where every note shatters crystal, where every wave lasts for ever; where a beacon lights the

dark wood, and nothing can go wrong. He was boundless. He was kwakabazillion.

The blokes really seem to like your Sarah. Or is it Sarah who likes a rough sort of bloke?

Red's remark, sudden and sardonic, propelled Jesse out of the zone and into realtime. Equilibrium torpedoed, he capsized with a sickening, bone-jarring crash into the halfpipe, bouncing and flailing as he rolled to the bottom. He was lucky that Sarah had insisted on borrowing a helmet for him. 'I don't need it,' he'd said. Now he lay unmoving, winded, intent on placating the pain. After a few minutes he was able to wonder whether he'd broken anything. Nope, said Red. Now get up. One of the other lads in the halfpipe whipped to a halt right next to Jesse, helped him to his feet, removed his helmet, asked if he was OK. It was the stunning skater he'd been watching before. 'Brilliant switch mctwist you had going there,' said the lad, 'what happened?' Come on, Red prodded. Save your social niceties for tea at Windsor Castle. They're over there by the bench.

'Saw that,' drawled Mick when Jesse stood before him. 'You need some practice.'

'What do you think you're doing here?' Jesse asked.

Mick's mate narrowed his eyes, a little bloodshot, a little belligerent, but decidedly less so than Jesse's tone. He and Mick had skateboards tucked under their arms. A couple of girls posed at their sides, no one whom Jesse recognised. They wore the usual uniform of tight tops and garish shorts – very *short* shorts, Jesse thought in disgust – and loads of war paint. Their eyes were bold and greedy, their lips crimson.

'Public place, isn't it?' asked Mick's friend.

'Not when I'm here,' said Jesse, staring straight at Mick.

Mick glanced uncertainly at the girls, then at his companion, then more defiantly at Jesse. He had backup; and he had a reputation to maintain. He was careful not to look at Sarah.

Only then did Jesse remember Sarah's presence. She was watching Mick's friend, a faint beading of sweat above her upper lip. It needed someone who knew her very well to detect the intensity behind her staged calm, as if she were about to make her debut before a gathering of the world's most exacting dance critics. Jesse could tell that her pulse must be racing. He turned back to Mick.

'Introduce your friend,' Jesse said.

'My name's Gavin.' A wink at Sarah.

Jesse handed Sarah his skateboard, positioned his helmet on the bench, and wheeled to face the bastards. Careful, said Red. Show them who's boss but don't lose it.

'I thought I warned you to keep away from Sarah,' Jesse said.

'What the fuck –' Gavin began, but Jesse gave him no chance to finish.

'I don't say things twice.'

Mick transferred his board from one arm to another, shifting his weight. He didn't seem to know quite what to do with his eyes.

'Had a spliff too many?' Gavin asked.

'Shut up.'

Gavin moved closer. 'That's it.' He jerked his head at Sarah. 'Pretty lady, take your bloke home and get him to sleep it off. Before I do some serious damage.'

Mick muttered something under his breath.

'I didn't hear you,' Jesse said. 'Speak up.'

A punch or two if absolutely necessary, Red interjected. And I've got a nice line in Muay Thai kicks. But none of your fiery stuff with an audience.

But Jesse was no longer listening. No longer able to listen. The red glow in his head swallowed all caution; it emanated from deep within the reactor core where he safeguarded the flames. And, gluttonous, it was intensifying, spreading, feeding, degree by degree superheating – and breaking free of containment.

'Look, Gavin, let's forget this guy and do some skating,' Mick said.

Will you back off before you do something really stupid?

'Jesse,' Sarah said.

'Shut the fuck up.' And it wasn't clear to whom Jesse was speaking.

Gavin shook his head, almost regretfully. 'Oh man,' he said. 'You are one stupid fuckarse. Someone who doesn't know the right place for his tongue.' He smirked at Sarah. 'Like a nice wet fanny.'

'Keep *your* tongue in your mouth before I burn it away.'

'It's got to be a death wish, whoring after trouble like this.'

Mick's eyes flicked nervously from Jesse to Gavin and back to Jesse. He licked his lips and, hugging his board to his chest, took a step backwards.

'Jesse, please let's go,' Sarah said. 'The park is big enough for all of us.'

'The *world* is not big enough for these fucked-up pricks,' Jesse said. He could feel Red reaching for him, but he snatched up his rage like a blazing firebrand and thrust it with a low snarl at Gavin.

Who hissed and tossed his skateboard to one of the girls. She caught it with a broad smile. Gavin danced forward, his face assuming an in-yer-face ugliness that meant business. He was older and taller than Jesse, well muscled, practised, smug.

Sarah had risen to her feet, pale now.

'It'll be a pleasure – a real pleasure – to incinerate rubbish like you,' Jesse said.

'You – you pervy piece of – ' Gavin's shoulders bunched, and he raised his arms, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. Malice rolled off him like sweat. He was poised to tear Jesse apart – it was only a second now before he moved – but it was Mick who stopped him with a restraining hand.

'Wait. This isn't a good time. Too many people around.'

Angrily Gavin shook off Mick's grip.

Mick tried once more. 'Listen to me, Gavin. This guy's got a thing with fire.'

Gavin's face was flushed. A fleck of spit adhered to the corner of his mouth, and his eyes were narrowed and hard as marbles. He swung his head round and glared at Mick. Gavin's throat was swollen with venom – a toad's, pulsing, obscene. Anyone would do. Mick. A policeman. God, if he could be had.

'Come on, then, if you're coming.' Jesse's voice was amused now. 'Or can't you get it up when your boyfriend's not licking your arse?'

Gavin swivelled.

Jesse was standing with his arms folded, pelvis arrogantly tilted. A mocking smile touched his lips. Not a centimetre, not a quarter-centimetre did he back away. He looked for all the world like a supremely confident gunslinger; all that was missing were the spurs and ten-gallon hat. And the gun.

'No one calls me names. Get it, cunt, no one.'

Jesse laughed.

That was the trigger. Gavin lunged for Jesse. It wasn't clear whether he was planning to pummel Jesse's face or grab him by the throat, but in any case Gavin didn't stand a chance. And Mick knew it. He turned away at the precise moment when Gavin screamed and fell back, waving his hands frantically in the air. His palms were raw and blistered. He clamped his hands between his thighs, moaned low in his throat, screwed up his face in agony.

Jesse hadn't even blinked. He waited with a look of good-humoured tolerance on his face, as if watchin' the antics of a coupla little kids who'd nicked their pa's pouch of baccy and were smokin' behind the cowshed.

'Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!' Gavin screeched.

The girl holding Gavin's skateboard parted her lips and eyed Jesse speculatively, but made no move to help her date – if that's what he was. The other girl looked from Jesse to Gavin to Mick, a frown on her face. She seemed to be having a hard time grasping what was going on. Mick had retreated another couple of steps. He had no intention of tangling with Jesse.

Gavin was gradually gaining control of himself. Still clenching his hands between his thighs he looked up at Jesse with a mixture of fear and real hatred.

'I'll get you for this, you smegsucker,' he said.

'For what?' asked Jesse innocently. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

Gavin held out his hands.

'You'd better pray that they heal, pray real good.'

'You seem to be a bit muddled,' Jesse said with a smile. His gesture included the rest of them. 'Did anyone see me touch him just now?' His smile widened. 'Maybe it's one of those new viruses.' He looked directly at Gavin's girl. 'I'd be very careful if I were you.'

Gavin jerked forward as if to have another go at Jesse despite his injured hands, then thought better of it. He stood there panting, his arms hanging loose from his shoulders, his face still white with pain; with rage. Jesse knew that he was going to have to watch his back, Gavin wouldn't be as easy to despatch as Mick. But he couldn't help being rather pleased with himself.

For the first time one of the girls spoke, the one holding Gavin's skateboard. 'What did he mean about your boyfriend, Gav?'

'Ask Mick, why don't you?' Jesse said.

He moved to Sarah's side and rested a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened under his touch. There was an odd expression on her face. He delved into the back pocket of his jeans for his cigarettes, shook one out with a flick of his wrist, and brought it up to his lips in a smooth one-handed movement, then pocketed the packet again. After lighting up with the

handsome Zippo Finn had given him, he blew a perfect smoke ring. Then he cast an insolent glance at Mick.

‘As for you, you don’t learn very quick, do you? Maybe you need another *dancing* lesson.’

Enough. No matter how much Sarah would love to see those two bastards cut up and ground into mince, fried, smothered in ketchup, *consumed*, there was something unsettling about the way Jesse was behaving. What had got into him? She’d never seen him take pleasure in humiliating someone quite like this before. At first she’d thought his bravado was an act. Those mannerisms – those lines – exaggerated to the point of self-parody. But even Jesse wasn’t that good. He was liking it. Liking it a whole lot. And what did that make him but another one of them?

Sarah slid from under Jesse’s grip with a twitch of her shoulder and regarded the two girls who were slowly edging into the background. The one with the blond quills looked as dumb as cheese. But both of them should have known better. Yeah right. Had *she*? Maybe if another girl had warned her ... a dram of an idea, first a single drop, then a trickle, then a noisy splash ...yes! Her mouth turned up at the corner in a way that Katy would have known all too well. Payback, Sarah thought. With a sense of elation – was she really going to do this? – she straightened her shoulders, ignored her pounding heart, and framed the words carefully in her mind. It probably wouldn’t do any good, but it would feel great trying.

She addressed the girls. ‘Listen to me. You really need to keep away from these losers. Have you got any idea what they do? They’re *rapists*. Believe me. I know, because they raped me a few weeks ago. That’s why my friend here is so upset.’ An even better idea erupted in her head, gushing a fountain of lovely prickly champagne. She added, her eyes raking Mick, ‘And I intend to make sure that every girl in school knows about it.’

The rush was better than she could have ever imagined.

Everyone was stunned into immobility, but Sarah didn’t wait to gloat. A performer knows instinctively how to time the perfect exit. She tossed Jesse’s skateboard at his feet, picked up her own, and strode off in the direction of the bus stop. Go to the police, Jesse had urged. How wrong he’d been. This was much, much better. She grinned, then laughed aloud, then did a quick jazzy run of ball changes and flick kicks in sheer exuberance. Mick was just about pissing himself. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? There wouldn’t be a girl at school who’d go near him, not if handled right. A hint here, a whisper there. Nothing that sounded like he might have dropped her. Like jealousy. Jesse wasn’t the only one who could fan a few flames. It would spread like wildfire. Mick had been just a little too *cocksure* that she would keep quiet, that she wouldn’t dare, that she would be crushed/demeaned/terrified/ashamed/intimidated/dirtied – and she had been, hadn’t she? All of them.

What was it her mum always said? Victims often participate in their own victimisation.

‘Sarah, what’s going on? Why did you run off?’

Jesse caught her by the wrist and spun her round. They were near the clover bowl. She snatched her arm from his grasp, dropped her skateboard,

and stood facing him while she brushed back her hair. Abruptly she tugged off the thick elastic.

‘Sarah?’

The smug look was gone from his face. His forehead was creased, and a familiar shadow darkened his eyes: the wariness of a dog which didn’t know if it were about to get a bone or a blow. He touched her hesitantly on the arm. When she swayed back, she might as well have struck him across the face. He looked down at his feet.

‘It’s bad enough that you haven’t trusted me. That you’ve kept all sorts of important stuff from me. But you’d better understand one thing from the get-go,’ she said. ‘You don’t own me. I’m not a bone to be snarled over by a pack of dogs.’

‘You know I don’t think that.’

‘Do I? It looked a lot like ownership back there.’ She pitched her voice in a fair imitation of his cool menace: ‘Keep away from Sarah. She’s off-bounds. She’s mine.’

His lips tightened. ‘I was just trying to protect you from –’

‘Protect me?’ Her voice rose. ‘Protect me? Did I ask you for help? Did I look so desperate that I needed some wannabe cowboy to come riding over – on a *skateboard* – to rescue poor helpless little Sarah?’ She stopped to take a breath. To stoke up enough heat to go on, because a nasty little voice at the back of her head was beginning to make itself heard. She knew that voice. She ignored it. ‘You’re just like one of them, aren’t you. One of the boys. Just a bit smoother, a bit more exotic with your bag of fancy tricks. Bloody great magic tricks to be sure. But no different from any other bloke I’ve ever met when you come right down to it. Always looking for yes, and taking damned good care that no one else gets a piece of your yes. Jesus, it’s all about sex and ego, isn’t it. And mostly sex.’ She threw a contemptuous glance at the relevant part of his anatomy, making sure he saw it. ‘I ought to feel sorry for you. Must be real *hard* to think straight when you’re walking round in that state all the time.’

Jesse tried to smile. A brave attempt, which died almost as soon as it had begun. He laid his skateboard and helmet at Sarah’s feet, pivoted, and walked away. After a few paces he stopped and looked over his shoulder. ‘I was very proud of you back there,’ he said quietly. ‘Take care of Nubi, will you?’ He broke into a lope before she had a chance to reply.

She watched him go with a tight feeling in her chest.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’ Thomas asked, concern on his clever ugly face. He’d just finished work, an off-the-books cleaning job with long hours and low wages that he barely managed in between stints at the gallery, but he needed the money for next year. His family wasn’t well-off, and there were four other kids in the family. He’d come round as soon as he heard the tears in her voice.

How easy it would be, Sarah thought, if only you could fall in love with your best friend. She remembered the years of bullying Thomas had put up with till he’d learned a trick or two. Then he’d started to dance and it got better, especially when he found out he could soon outjump and outrun and

outkick just about any of them. When *they* found out he could. Now he volunteered in the school's buddy system, teaching younger kids how to get help.

'Jesse hasn't come back yet. Hasn't rung.' Sarah said. 'We had a row.'

She prodded the candle with a finger while Thomas watched her, his pizza growing cold. Some of the wax spilled through the indentation in the softened rim and ran into the glass candleholder. She scooped it up and kneaded it in her fingers, rolled it as it hardened into a tight little ball.

'I said some vile things to him this evening. I feel awful.'

'Look, we all do it sometimes,' Thomas said.

'Tommy, I opened my mouth and these stupid hateful *hideous* words just poured out. It was like there were two people inside me – the real Sarah and the other one, the one that wanted to see how far I could go, how much I could punish him.'

'For what?'

'For being strong and male and so sure of himself.'

'Jesse? Sure of himself? Are we talking about the same person?'

'OK. Sometimes sure of himself. And sometimes so fragile that I'm afraid he'll dissolve like rice paper if I so much as touch my lips to his skin. That's why it's so terrible what I did. Punish him, test him, call it what you want. All for being the kind of person he is. For being *what* he is. For being Jesse.' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'For making me terrified of losing him.'

Jesse thumbed a lift with a farm lorry as far as the junction to Matthew's lane. He desperately needed to talk with Matt. As he plodded through the wood, he could feel signs of the Red's presence, although it didn't address him directly. He felt sick about Sarah. Again and again he asked himself how to build a bulwark against this insidious cohabitation, which he could no longer pretend was disinterested.

Maybe there really was a puckish force operating in the universe, Jesse reflected. Magnificent treacherous Loki, who with a snigger of mischief snatched up the dice and replaced them with a thirteen-sided pair. Or else a truly malign god, who offered him Sarah and her family with one hand, and Red with the other. Neither prospect consoled Jesse unduly.

A sudden stir in the undergrowth. Daisy appeared, blood beading from a fresh scratch on her muzzle, a tangle of twigs and dried leaves draped over one ear. She came to a halt in front of Jesse, fixing her eyes on him. Her hackles rose, and she bared her teeth, then began to growl. 'Daisy, it's me,' he said, but she didn't seem to recognise him. 'Come on, girl, take it easy, you know me, Matt's friend.' Slowly he retreated a few steps, she looked ready to tear out his throat. 'Daisy?' Snarls, meaty and guttural, pursued him. Nasty useless brutes, he heard Red say. Then frantic barking sawed through Jesse's head. 'Stop!' he cried but the agony continued – loud, rabid, frenzied – until he raised his arms and cried out once more. There was a short whine followed by the relief of silence.

Jesse had crossed the cattlegrid and was laying his hands on the gate latch when he looked behind him up the private lane towards Matthew's cottage. He jerked back as if the metal had branded his skin. How had he got

here? He had no recollection of ... of what? He'd been heading towards the cottage. And why did he seem to remember Daisy?

You don't want to bother with that stuff, said Red. It's a waste of time.

What the fuck are you talking about?

No call for profanities. I've only got our best interests at heart.

Is that so? Then what just happened to my memory?

Jesse noticed an unpleasant mustard-coloured hue to Red's silence.

'You'd better tell me what you're up to!' Jesse shouted.

Calm down. All that petty muddle, life's fitful fever. Fine for your Shakespeare but a little irrelevant for us, wouldn't you say?

Feelings aren't irrelevant. Sarah's not irrelevant.

We'll get to her another time.

Angry now, Jesse jammed a clenched fist against his teeth. A sweet odour beset him, a metallic taste. Slowly he held out his hand, then the other. He stared at them for a long while. They were scratched and streaked, and his fingernails caked with a reddish-brown, sticky substance. He raised his hands to his nose and sniffed, first in puzzlement, then in growing dread.

'What have I done?' he whispered.

There was no answer from his companion.

He sprinted back along the track until he came upon Daisy. For a moment he thought she was merely dozing in the bracken and called out to her, but then he noticed the odd angle of her head and the blood seeping from her mouth and nose. And the flies. He dropped to his knees and laid his ear against her chest. Nothing. He waited, though for what he couldn't have said. Or maybe it would simply take too much energy to lift his head. The only thing he heard was the thick sap of the trees, suppurating – even his thoughts moved like silent wraiths through a blank and suffocating cloud of ash.

Twilight returned along with the sensation of itchy wetness on his cheeks. He raised his face from the large patch his tears had dampened on Daisy's beautiful creamy fur. Sarah, he thought, help me. How do I tell Matthew? Her fingers brushed the nape of his neck, her lips. He dragged himself to his feet, lifted the heavy dog in his arms, and began the long trudge to the cottage.

Chapter 33

Sunday before dawn. It must have rained earlier – the air was damp and chill, with the raw green-tea smell of more to come. Sarah checked her alarm: five o'clock. No point tossing and turning any longer. She donned a fleecy jumper and tried reading; she tried listening to music; and finally, gazing out the open window, she tried listening for the first drops of rain but heard only the birds, the wind, the house, her fear ... listening for footsteps.

'Where's Jesse, by the way?' Meg asked. 'Still sleeping?'

Sarah looked at her father in alarm. He read the appeal in her eyes.

'He hasn't come home,' Finn said quietly.

Meg looked up. 'What do you mean? Where is he? At Matthew's?'

Finn shook his head. 'We don't know,' he said. 'I rang Matthew. He doesn't seem to be feeling well. He didn't want to speak. Jesse was there last night but left after a short while.'

Meg studied Sarah's face, then poured another cup of coffee, her eyes falling on the late roses Jesse had cut yesterday. 'I like their smell,' he'd said when teased about his fondness for flowers, and gardening.

'Don't worry,' Meg said. 'He's all right. He'll be back.' She smiled an odd smile, one which Sarah didn't recognise. 'Jesse can look after himself.'

Sarah pushed back her chair. The air in the kitchen, despite the open window, was suddenly stifling. She walked to the back door and opened it, breathed in the smell of unshed rain. Nubi slunk out into the garden. The sky was grey, a bleak liverish sky. The letter had arrived under just such a dark ceiling of cloud two years ago. Had time suddenly twisted out of shape like those incomprehensible hypercubes they'd done in maths?

The phone rang. Sarah spun round, then sagged against the doorframe when she realised it was the signal for Finn's private line. Finn popped a piece of bacon into his mouth and turned the gas low under the frying pan.

'I'll get it, then we can eat,' he said.

He snagged another piece of bacon, licked his fingers with a wink at Meg, and left the room, shutting the kitchen door behind him.

'Come and sit down,' Meg said. 'It's probably one of those interminable discussions with New York. Those people seem to keep hospital hours, they even work on Sundays.'

'You don't think it could be Jesse, do you?' Sarah couldn't stop herself from asking.

'Not that line. Sarah, about Jesse, I hate to lecture you but –'

'Then don't!' snapped Sarah, gesticulating and sloshing some of her coffee. She fetched a sponge from the sink. After mopping up the spill, Sarah opened the newspaper to the film reviews. Meg knew better than to sigh. A recent copy of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent*

Psychiatry on hand for such contingencies, she flipped to an article on antidepressant use among psychiatrists.

Both Sarah and Meg looked up from their reading when Finn returned. His face was grim and set, ashen. Meg moved quickly to his side and laid a hand on his arm.

‘What is it?’ she asked gently.

‘A fire,’ Finn said. He turned his eyes on Sarah, who rose abruptly, knocking over her chair, who wanted to look away but couldn’t. ‘A fire,’ he repeated. His words came to Sarah from a great distance. A rushing sound, the roar of a furnace door opening, of flames rising, swaying no she felt the hot wind tearing at her, tearing away her skin her flesh her ... ‘Jesse,’ someone cried, and her mother was holding her and she was fighting her fighting to remain upright to remain conscious, she had to hear, to *know* ...

‘I need a cup of coffee,’ Finn said. He sat down stiffly, like an old man, and stared into the mug Meg placed before him on the table without drinking.

Ayen had spoken in a tight cracked voice, so different from her usual cultured vowels that he needed to ask twice who was ringing. At first Finn thought her angry, but soon realised that it was fear distorting her speech.

‘Is Jesse there?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he replied cautiously, ‘he’s gone out.’

‘Where was he last night?’

‘Ayen, just what is this about?’

‘The research complex.’ She took a deep breath which he could hear catching in her throat. ‘It burnt down about three a.m.’

‘A fire? How? You must have superb safety systems in place over there.’

‘We did.’

‘Look, maybe you’d best start at the beginning.’

‘Finn, it’s gone. Everything. Every last –’ She stopped, and Finn listened to the hiss while she got her voice under control again. ‘The alarms worked, and we were able to get everyone out in time. But then – it was as if a nuclear device went off. Total meltdown. I mean it when I say nothing’s left. *Nothing*. I’m not even sure a recovery team will be able to get inside. From what little we can tell, all the passages have collapsed and everything has fused.’

‘Jesus. I’m sorry to hear that. You must have records of your research elsewhere, though.’

‘Some, not much. But there are going to be problems, mammoth problems, until we find out what caused this.’

‘I can imagine. But why are you ringing me?’ He shifted the phone to his other ear. ‘And why are you asking about Jesse?’

‘He was here last night just before everything went haywire.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me.’

‘Impossible. How would he get there? He doesn’t have a clue where it is. Or did you send someone out for him?’ His voice hardened. ‘Without asking me?’

'No.'

'Then it's impossible. It's a high security installation. The highest.'

'No longer. It's a solid mass of melted plastic and twisted metal and rubble hardened to something like volcanic rock.'

'OK. I get the picture. But why do you fancy Jesse was there?'

'Because I saw him. Finn, I *saw* him in the room with the prototype just before the alarms went off. I was too shocked to react at first. And then everything went crazy. I ran to check the displays, and by the time I looked round, he was gone. Probably. At least I didn't see him again.'

'Are you sure? Absolutely sure? Maybe you –'

'I did *not* imagine it. Don't even suggest it,' Ayen interrupted. 'We've started something with that boy. You know it as well as I do. And now it's – he's – got out of control. And nobody will believe a word of it, will they?'

Finn closed his eyes for a moment. If Jesse had really been there ... If he'd been caught in the explosion ...

'Finn? Are you still there?'

'Yes.' He cleared his throat. He mustn't show her how seriously he took her account – how much it mattered. 'Is there any chance Jesse didn't escape?'

'How the hell should I know?' It was the first time he'd ever heard even a mild oath pass her lips. 'I almost wish he hadn't.'

'Ayen! Get hold of yourself. How can you say such a thing? He's just a boy, a young homeless kid.'

'He's no boy. Not any longer.'

Finn had no answer for her. Then he realised what she was in truth afraid of.

'You reckon he did it, don't you? Started the fire – or explosion or whatever it was?'

'There's no other possible explanation.'

'Nonsense. Even if Jesse could've managed anything remotely like this sort of *incident* – he was glad she couldn't see his face, he'd nearly said *friendly fire*, how he hated their bloody doublespeak, if anything had happened to Jesse he'd make sure Ayen saw some real friendly fire – 'there must be any number of parties who would be keen to disrupt the project. And you're going to face some pretty rigorous investigation about risks, safety measures. I hope there's nothing you've been keeping under wraps.' Finn smiled, cold as he felt. They always had something they were hiding. 'What about the prototype?'

'Gone with all the rest. And that's the one thing I'm almost certain we can't rebuild, not easily, maybe not at all ... at least not now. There was an element of luck, of chance about the whole thing.'

Good.

'Before you start making any wild accusations about a kid, you'd better be prepared to answer a few perfectly reasonable questions, like why? why would Jesse want to destroy the computer?' Finn knew the answer, or at least part of it, but he certainly wouldn't help her out. 'And even more interesting, how? They're going to be asking, and soon. Crackpot theories about aliens or teenagers with superpowers don't go over awfully well with

government investigation committees. Especially coming from someone who might be delusional.'

'Delusional? Finn, you can't be serious! I tell you, he was there!'

'Did anyone else see him?'

'No.'

Even better.

'What about your security cameras?'

'At those temperatures?'

'You can't mean to tell me you didn't have the data stored in a backup unit elsewhere?'

'Extra security risk. We did our own backups right here on auxiliary storage devices. We didn't anticipate the remotest necessity ...'

Even better still.

'Not good, Ayen. There are going to be some very uncomfortable questions about your procedures.'

'Damn these bureaucrats. I'm not an office drone, for god's sake. Finn, you *know* I'm not imagining this about Jesse. You saw for yourself what he did with the knife.'

'Look, I'm just warning you to be prepared. It's not me you're going to have to convince. Something like an electrical fault would be a lot easier to swallow. And you know how they are about funding long shots.'

She was quiet for a moment. Finn knew that she was very ambitious. He tried to remember which women scientists since Marie Curie had won the Nobel Prize. There had been some, definitely, in medicine.

'Finn, if he's alive we've got to find him. Question him. And stop him somehow. We have no idea what he's capable of.'

'He hasn't come back since yesterday evening. We've been worried sick about him.' That, at least, was not far from what he was feeling. 'There's no reason for him not to come back unless ...' His voice trailed off. 'Unless he was killed.' His stomach twisted; he didn't like using the word. It's not that he was superstitious, not precisely ...

'Somebody should go through his stuff. Maybe we can find a clue to his whereabouts.'

'Ayen, he *has* no stuff, except the few bits of clothing we've bought him. He was homeless, don't you remember? I'll have someone from my department go over his room, but I fear it won't help you.'

'Have you uncovered anything at all about his background?'

'Ayen, forget about Jesse. You've got bigger problems to worry about right now. Anyway, what can he do without your prototype? The computer was the key, wasn't it?'

'He got through the highest security we've been able to devise, hasn't he?'

'*Before* the prototype was destroyed. Maybe. You seem to think so. But don't ever assume anything, that's what this business has taught me. You only saw him for couple of seconds, at most. *If* you saw him. Maybe the computer was behind it, projecting an illusion at you – some kind of holographic image. It seemed to have some very interesting capabilities of its own.'

'Yes ... I suppose.' Her voice was doubtful, but some of the tension had left it. She wanted to believe that she hadn't unleashed a monster on the

world, or at least on the remnants of her career. Finn just wanted to believe that Jesse was still alive. The rest could wait – together with Jesse he'd find a way to deal with it.

'Look, Ayen, if he shows up here – and where else does he have to go? – I'll make sure he stays put. But I expect you'll find that, even if he's alive, without the computer he's nothing more than a bright kid, a bit more sensitive than most.'

'A bit, you call it?'

'That doesn't make him Superman. Don't forget that he's been staying with us for a while now. My wife's a psychiatrist. We would have noticed if something were amiss. He's no mass murderer, that I can promise you, no psychotic. A perfectly normal teenager with a few paranormal gifts. And aren't they supposed to fade after puberty?'

'There's no real evidence for that.' But Ayen's voice had lightened.

They exchanged another sentence or two before Ayen rang off. Finn dropped the phone with an unsteady hand. He'd put her off for now, but Ayen was too smart – and too thorough – to forget about Jesse entirely. Finn hoped he'd given her enough to worry about. If he'd only known what he was getting into when he'd first mentioned Jesse to her ... He leaned his head on his hands and shut his eyes, trying to think. But all he could see was a scene from one of those disaster movies he'd watched on a recent flight, where a tidal wave of flame raced along a tunnel, consuming everything in its path. He shivered. It was cold in his office. He needed a cup of hot coffee, with plenty of sugar. He didn't dare take a drink, much as he'd like one.

'Tell me,' Sarah said.

Finn looked up from his coffee.

'Tell me,' she repeated, her voice rising sharply.

Finn spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. He couldn't do it. He glanced at Meg for help.

'What's happened, Finn?' she asked calmly enough. 'A fire, you said.'

The kitchen door swung open and Jesse walked in.

Finn half rose from his chair. 'Where the fuck have you been?' he bellowed.

Jesse took a step backwards. Finn's face was rigid with anger – the kind of anger painted in lurid colours on a grotesque stage mask. And then Jesse saw it: something else flickered behind the eyeholes. Oh god, not that – not Finn.

Nubi barked.

They all jumped at the unexpected sound and turned towards the doorway. Nubi rushed at Jesse, prancing and springing up and making little yipping cries of joy. Jesse couldn't help smiling, albeit unsteadily. Nubi was practically wriggling out of his coat from excitement. There was no welcome like a dog's.

'Down, Nubi,' Jesse said, but fondled the dog's head and scratched him behind the ears. It was easier than looking at Finn, and far easier than at Sarah.

'Where have you been all night?' Finn asked again, but in a quieter tone of voice.

'I'm sorry, I should have rung,' Jesse said.

'Damn right.'

Jesse raised his head and met Finn's eyes, now clear, a touch astringent, but simple and uncomplicated. Glad.

'I had some things to take care of,' Jesse said.

'In the middle of the night?' Finn asked.

Meg intervened. 'Go and wash up, Jesse. You look tired, and I daresay you're hungry. There'll be plenty of time to talk after you've got some coffee and toast inside you.'

Jesse nodded gratefully. At last his eyes slid towards Sarah, who was gripping the back of a kitchen chair, head lowered, face hidden by her morning hair. For a moment it seemed as if he'd speak, then his shoulders drooped and he left the kitchen.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' Finn said. 'Go after him. You don't need your father to tell you that, do you?'

Jesse was leaning his head against the cool glass of the mirror when Sarah knocked on the open door to his bathroom. He looked up, then without a word gathered her into his arms.

'Sorry,' they both said at the same time, almost as if they'd bumped heads. They laughed softly, relieved to have the moment over, then clung together, breathing in each other's scent, tasting it through their pores: the lavender that Jesse had come to love, a certain sleepy musk, even the smell of coffee on her breath; the sharp male tang of soap and sweat and something else that Sarah would never be able to define but was unmistakably Jesse, something woodsy and smoky and honest.

'I never want to own you in any way,' Jesse said.

'I know,' said Sarah. 'I don't know what got into me. I said such awful things. Such stupid things.'

'As long as you're honest with me, you can say whatever you want. Whatever needs to be said.'

What's he doing with me? Sarah thought, pushing her hair off her face. I'll never be able to live up to his expectations. To keep up with him. Just wait till he realises I'm like ten thousand other girls. Till he gets bored.

As if reading her thoughts, Jesse put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her forward till her head rested against his collarbone. He ran his hands through her hair, again and again, only stopping when she drew back to speak.

'Jesse, I'm nothing like you. I'm not especially clever or brave or good or anything. Don't look for any miracles from me.'

'Miracles?' His mouth twisted. 'I don't want any miracles. Just –' He faltered. 'Just ordinary,' he finished lamely, his eyes downcast. Why did it have to be so hard? Why did most people get to marry and have kids, a job, maybe a bit of money in the bank; and others were born disabled or ill or just plain unlucky – the big C before they were ten, parents who abused or abandoned them, an accident. Miracles? He'd give anything for normal, just fucking normal. But you didn't get to choose, did you? Or

did you? You might be born with perfect pitch, but that didn't mean you had to become a cellist. Or even sing in the school choir. No one *forced* you to use your gifts.

Jesse looked down at his hands, resting on Sarah's shoulders. He couldn't change the past, no one could, but maybe it wasn't too late for a little sanity in his life. No more fires. No more deaths. And definitely no more Ayens. A future ... He lifted his head and grinned his lopsided grin.

'You're a very special sort of ordinary,' he said.

She snorted. 'I'm not, though. You just don't know me well enough.'

'Then don't tell me. I think I prefer my illusions.'

She kissed the tuck at the corner of his mouth, the one that always reminded her of brownies, then held his eyes without blinking. 'I never thought it would be like this.' He wasn't one of the lads at school. If anyone could bear the truth, it was Jesse. 'Loving someone. You.' There. It was said.

The room was silent as they both struggled to find a way forward to the place where they might dance.

'Yes,' he finally said.

Sarah remembered her mum's words: give him time. With a small sigh she propelled Jesse gently towards the basin.

'Go on, brush your teeth,' she said. 'I'm so famished I could even eat a few rashers of bacon.'

Finn knocked at the door just as Jesse was thrusting his arms into a fresh T-shirt.

'Come in,' Jesse called.

Finn came into the room, pulled out the desk chair, and straddled the seat so that his arms rested on the back. Jesse sat on the bed. There was no avoiding this confrontation. All right then.

'Are you worried about the new school?' Finn asked.

'Get to the point,' Jesse said. Then he looked down, ashamed of the sharpness in his voice. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

'For Christ's sake, don't treat me like a teacher or social worker. Some rudeness is healthy, you know. Better than cold showers, even. Clears out the, uh, sinuses.'

They grinned at each other, and Jesse yawned, hugely.

'Where were you last night?' Finn asked.

'I guess you already know.'

'I was afraid of that.'

'Were you?'

'Was I what?' Finn asked.

Jesse looked at him, then away. 'Afraid? Afraid of me?' The back of his throat suddenly felt scratchy, like a cold coming on.

Finn didn't answer at first. Then he sighed and began to stroke his beard. 'Yes,' he said. 'A bit.'

Jesse closed his eyes.

Finn came over and sat down on the bed, put his arm around Jesse's shoulders. After a while some of the stiffness eked out of Jesse's body, and

he leaned into Finn's bulk with the same feeling of warm dreamy lethargy that came after a long hard swim, after making love.

'Will you tell them?' Jesse asked.

'Do you actually believe I'd hand you over to some narrow-minded fools who'd just as soon dissect you as not? Do you think so little of me? Do you *trust* me so little?'

'No, but –'

'Damn it, Jesse, there are no *buts*. Not now, not with you.'

'Because of Sarah?'

'Sarah's part of it, yes. But there's *you*. Can't you get it through that weird wired skull of yours that we care about you, all of us.' He took Jesse by the shoulders and forced him to meet his eyes. 'We love you.'

Maybe ordinary was a kind of miracle too.

'How the hell did you do it?' Finn asked.

Jesse took his time before answering. 'I made sure all of them could get out of the building. No one was injured.'

'Ayen said. Thank god for that.'

'She saw me, I reckon.'

'Yeah, but she was the only one. There's a good chance that nobody else will ask about you. I've planted a couple of seeds in Ayen's mind. She's a very smart, very slick woman. I doubt that she's going to do anything to jeopardise her standing with the right agencies. Nor her professional reputation. Scientists are a pretty conservative lot, for the most part.'

'A cover-up, you mean?'

'Think of it rather as a retouching job. Or sleight-of-hand, like producing a rabbit from a hat.'

Jesse picked up Peter's top, frowning slightly. He turned it over and over in his hand.

'What is it?' Finn asked.

The little toy felt warm, as if it had been lying in a patch of sunlight. It was vibrating faintly – a low hum, like the sound a small electronic device might make, or the quivering of a frightened animal – those baby rabbits he'd once found in the orchard, some dead already, others trembling in his hand, his father had run over them in the high grass with the mower, they'd tried to see if any others were left inside the hole. Not much difference between alive and dead, a moment's inattention, mere particles atoms molecules whirring and spinning through an illusion of substance. If you just reached in and –

'Jesse?'

– so much empty space, seconds and seconds of space to cross –

'Jesse!'

Jesse jerked back from the rabbit hole. He stared at Finn, but his eyes were still focused on the supersymmetry of that beautiful infinite tunnel.

'Your eyes –' Finn said. The brilliant blue of a cyanotype print overlaid with silver – thick, distant silver.

'Sorry. What did you ask?'

Jesse tilted his head, and the reflection – if that’s what it had been – was gone.

‘I asked how you destroyed an entire top-secret underground complex with nothing more than a couple of coins and some cigarettes in your pocket?’

‘I –’ Jesse began. He stopped and looked sheepish. ‘I have no idea. Not really.’

‘Did you *walk* there?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Could you be a touch more specific?’ Finn asked drily.

‘It wasn’t too hard to get a lift most of the way.’

‘The site isn’t on any map. You must have an exceptional sense of direction.’

A hint of a smile. ‘Sort of.’

‘I see. Another sort of.’ Finn glanced sidelong at the photograph he’d recently hung above Jesse’s desk, a platinum print of a bat suspended from a tree branch in summer. There was an ethereal quality to the moonlight, as though the scene had been frosted with ice.

Jesse noticed the direction of Finn’s gaze. ‘I don’t suppose a bat has any idea how it navigates either, but it does.’

‘Perhaps in time you’ll come to understand it better,’ Finn said.

‘Yeah.’ This time Jesse gave a short, harsh laugh. ‘Maybe.’

The room was quiet till Finn shook his head. ‘And maybe it doesn’t matter all that much.’

‘Like those who are blind *preferring* their blindness?’ Jesse asked with heavy sarcasm.

‘You’re not suggesting that if bats understood how their radar worked, it would help them to fly better? To live better?’

‘I suppose not.’ Arms folded, Jesse stared at the bat as though it might swoop for his head if he dared to speak. Suddenly he cried out, ‘But how do I live with *this*?’ And then was glad he’d said it.

Jesse held out a hand, palm up. The top rose into the air, spun rapidly for a few seconds, and disappeared.

Finn’s eyes swept the room. ‘Where did it go?’

‘Into the game.’

‘What are you talking about? Which game?’

‘Come and look.’

Finn went with Jesse to his desk, where he pressed the *enter* key on the laptop. Almost immediately the screen showed the interior of a room. This room – Jesse’s. Jesse fiddled with the mouse, and with a dizzying sweep the window swung into view, where on the sill lay the little top. Finn whirled to face the window. And there it was: the top resting in plain sight, no more subversive than a wooden bauble. Like one of those hand-carved figures Meg hung on their tree at Christmas.

‘It wasn’t there before,’ Finn said rather stupidly. ‘I’d have noticed.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is it real?’

Jesse snorted. 'You tell me what's real.' He walked over to the window, picked up the top, and tossed it to Finn, who caught it easily in his hand. He looked back at the monitor. The top had disappeared from view.

'I see,' Finn said. Though of course he didn't.

'Then for god's sake explain it to me. I'm going crazy mad trying to make sense of what's happening.'

Jesse came across the room and lowered the cover of the laptop. His shoulders sloping with fatigue, he remained with his back to Finn, who regarded the two small knobs of ridged scar tissue protruding above the neckline of Jesse's T-shirt. It was a struggle to keep from touching them.

'Jesse, look at me.'

Jesse turned.

'Real is Sarah, baking brownies for you in the kitchen. Real is a home and school and family. Real is even those scars of yours, because they'll help to remind you that no one is perfect. As to the rest, I doubt that you'll get an answer, at least none that'll satisfy you. This is a helluva strange garden we've been granted. Vast. Complex. Incomprehensible. Indifferent. Cruel. Scary. But utterly wonderful.'

Jesse massaged the back of his neck, feeling the thickened skin under his fingertips. 'Not always so wonderful.'

'No, not always. Hey, even God doesn't get to be infallible.' Finn grinned. 'Now why don't we have breakfast so you can get some rest?'

Jesse rubbed a hand wearily over his face.

'Listen, Finn, about the research facility ... I had to do it. I'm not proud of it. If there had been another way ... If I could've thought of something else ... But there wasn't much time any more. Do you understand? I had no choice.'

'Yeah, I know they'd have been very persistent, Ayen and her crew. Though your method was rather drastic, I daresay.'

'Not them. They didn't worry me. It was him. It. Red, I called him. The computer.'

'The prototype? I thought you weren't going to have anything more to do with it.'

Jesse spoke in a rush, the frantic stagger and lurch of confession, almost stuttering in relief. 'He was in here, Finn. In my head. Probing and talking and demanding. Even when he was silent. Commanding. And he was strong, terribly strong ...'

'I don't understand. What do you mean, in your head?'

Jesse shrugged. 'Some kind of link was established when I first entered his – his what? circuits? mind? realm? reality? A switch was thrown, a connection made. And then at the park ... well, anyway, it became more than a link. I reckon that's how I located Ayen's place. I couldn't break free. I tried. And I was afraid, so very afraid. The only way I could get rid of him, I knew, was to destroy him. And fast. Before he grew strong enough to destroy me. Or control me. And whatever else he felt like doing.'

'The window?'

'Among other things.' His voice was bitter.

Finn was quiet for a while.

'And he let you destroy him?' he asked. 'He's gone now?'

'Yeah.'

No fool, Finn studied Jesse's face. 'Are you certain?'
Jesse dropped his gaze.
Finn hissed through his teeth.

Chapter 34

Jesse set the top spinning before him in the air, sent it out to a place of hypercomplex snow, and willed its instantaneous return. As the thin coating of ice melted against his skin, he would have been hard-pressed to describe the sensation in his fingertips. It felt like salty blue, a trill of silvers, sharp pungent aquamarine. There were congenitally blind people, he recalled reading somewhere, who could distinguish colour by touch alone; and those who painted astonishingly realistic, even exotic landscapes.

‘That’s a cool trick,’ Sarah said, cross-legged on his bed. ‘Where did it go?’

Wonderingly Jesse turned to face her. ‘You saw it disappear?’

‘Of course.’

‘Anything else?’

‘A trace – an afterglow of colour.’

The first flicker of excitement. ‘Which colour?’

Sarah considered. ‘I’m not sure.’ Shook her head. ‘No, it’s gone. A colour I’ve seen before, but which one? And where? I ought to remember. You know the feeling, something like *déjà vu*.’

Now a hot ember in his throat, smouldering with possibility. If Sarah could see colours beyond the ultraviolet cutoff ...

He didn’t care what they’d told him. His memories were *real*. Nothing he’d gone through had convinced him otherwise. Finn wouldn’t lie to him, but there were others, maybe many others in the vicious stackup. If he’d learned anything, it was to look for reasons behind reasons behind reasons.

If *Sarah* could see ...

Why should he be the only one? How stupid of him to think that he was unique, how egoistic. Mapping the mind had just begun, genuine understanding was far off. There were plenty of mysteries. Hardwiring was a code like any other. If the code could be modified, hacked ...

If Sarah could be taught to see ...

The worst was the loneliness.

Jesse scooped up his lighter and cigarettes, his hands trembling a little. ‘I need a smoke. Come out into the garden with me?’

‘I thought you were going to quit.’

‘Soon. Maybe.’

‘It’s late.’

‘Please.’

‘I’m half undressed.’

‘Please.’

She snorted but rose and slipped into her jeans. ‘If I get double pneumonia (and frostbite), you’ll do the explaining to my mother.’

He tossed her a hoodie from his wardrobe. ‘Here. Put it on. It’s coolish tonight.’

‘What about you?’

‘I seem to be growing less sensitive to the cold.’

'Is that so? Or maybe you've tired of needing extra clothes – a bit like Finn, you know – and decided to redesign your internal thermostat. When everyone else is wearing boots and wool and anoraks, you'll be sauntering down the road barefoot in a T-shirt and shorts, and sweating. And when the kids at school ask, I'm supposed to tell them you're the very latest model.'

Jesse laughed. 'They'll lock me up, not let me near a catwalk.'

'Not that kind of model, you eejit. The science fictiony sort.'

'Last time I showered, it was all real skin – scarred, and ugly as hell, but skin.' He held up a hand. 'No circuits or plastic anywhere.'

'I've already told you, it's not ugly. But turn round and let me look. Maybe I haven't noticed that one of those scars near your shoulder is comet-shaped.'

He stared at her, sudden disquiet crawling like genetically modified superlice along his scalp. He'd read Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*.

'What?' she asked.

'Nothing.'

'Oh yeah? You've gone white as a – as a –'

'As a sheet? a ghost?'

'Please. Even literary dolts like me have some taste.'

'Stop that. You read more than you let on. Obviously.'

'Yeah, but it's a little hard to keep up with you.'

'So you mind that I'm not Baryshnikov?'

'Only on Thursdays and alternate Saturdays.' She thrust her arms and head into the hoodie, and at first her voice was muffled. 'If we're going, let's get it over with. I'm dying for a warm bed and an even warmer – well, you know.' Her face emerged from the neck opening with a grin. 'There are a couple of innovative lifts and breathtaking holds that you could certainly teach Thomas. I don't know about Baryshnikov.'

'Thomas?' Jesse asked, struggling to keep his voice even. He could feel the colour mounting in his damned telltale cheeks.

She laughed that rich delighted laugh of hers. 'Don't tell me your jealous of *Thomas*!' She ran ahead of him across the room, out the door, and along the landing. Jesse followed more slowly, glad that she'd forgotten about Mitchell, and even gladder she'd probably not read *Ghostwritten* as well.

Jesse had his cigarette by the sundial, then let Sarah lead him to one of Nubi's favourite spots for napping.

'Let's talk up here,' she said, pulling down the rope ladder. Stapled into the old walnut tree, the treehouse was built more solidly than it looked.

'What's wrong with a nice comfortable bed?'

'Talk, I said,' but the look she gave him sufficed to half arouse him. He watched her buttocks move under her jeans as she climbed the ladder ahead of him. If anything, darkness increased the enticement; his excitement. He wondered if Sarah's body would ever become so familiar to him that he no longer imagined her unclothed. Sometimes he felt ashamed of his fantasies, as if Sarah – and the real thing – were not quite good enough. But not ashamed enough to wish for indifference. Did the years do that to everyone? All those middle-aged couples rescued from silence by TV ... Yet Finn and

Meg still seemed to take genuine physical delight in each other. Finn would probably answer him honestly, but it was something Jesse wasn't sure he could ask Sarah's dad.

'Talk before play,' Sarah said, though she immediately belied her words by unzipping his jeans. Then some time later, with a wicked grin, 'Better now?'

Indifference? Jesse thought as she drew him down next to her on the cushions. She lit a thick round candle, a cloying vanilla scent.

'Right. Now tell me about this fire. You might as well. I've left the condoms in your room,' Sarah said.

'What do you think about when we're making love?' he blurted out, surprising himself.

She didn't hesitate, almost as if she'd been expecting this question, or another just as silly and endearing. 'All kinds of stuff. And sometimes nothing at all, if it's really good ... really intense.' She took his left hand and raised it to her lips. She continued to kiss his fingers, one at a time. Jesse closed his eyes, wanting and not wanting to abandon himself to the sensation. She was playing with him, teasing him, yet he didn't mind. He felt safer than he'd ever felt in someone else's hands. Earthed. Even the smell of the candle no longer seemed so pervasive.

'You spend too much time inside your own head,' Sarah said, 'worrying about what you're doing wrong.'

Once again he was startled by her perspicuity. 'How did you know -?'

'If it's bondage, there are a few things we can try.'

'Jesus. Is that what you think of me?'

'Or anal sex. I don't think I'd mind, if we took it slow. I've checked the internet. There are some pretty good teen sites. Information, not porn. And thank god none of the usual coyness or you-kids-don't-want-to-be-thinking-of-this finger-wagging. Bloody hypocrites.' She was quiet while she toyed with the candle. Finally she asked, 'There've been boys, haven't there?'

Jesse looked away.

'You don't have to be ashamed,' she said.

'I'm not.'

'Then what?'

Again he didn't answer.

'I know I can't be everything to you, not to someone like you. If you want this to work, you've got to talk to me.'

'Don't do this, Sarah. Don't prostitute yourself.'

'Now you really are making me feel creepy - dirty. It's never occurred to you that I might like to fool around? Try some things too? A little freaky might be fun.'

'That's not what it sounds like.'

'Then listen better.' Sarah pushed the candle aside, rose onto her knees, and put her hands on Jesse's shoulders. 'Look at me.'

He looked. He couldn't not look.

'I trust you,' she said. 'Good sex is always about trust.'

'And how did you get to be so experienced?'

She dropped her hands. 'Do you mean that the way I think you do?'

'Fuck no. Why are we always doing this?'

‘Sniping?’

‘Misunderstanding each other.’ Careering wildly from warm tropic seas to arctic in an instant.

‘You’ve just given me the perfect cue, you know. This is when I’m supposed to tell you – again – to talk to me.’

‘But – ?’

For a long drawn-out moment it seemed she wouldn’t answer. The waves had withdrawn, the tide far out. She looked at him strangely, thoughts indrawn, something like fear contesting with defiance contesting with shame on her face. He could hear her windy breathing in the snug enclosed space of the treehouse, her old hideaway. She shivered – the cracks in the walls were caulked, but not the joists of memory.

‘Peter wrote us a letter when he left. It came by post ten days after he disappeared. I happened to be the first one home that afternoon. I burnt the letter straightaway without reading it, without even opening it.’

‘Why?’ he asked softly.

Her voice creaked like sun-cracked oars in rusted oarlocks. ‘I hated him for what he’d done to us. You can’t imagine what those last months were like. I didn’t want him to come back. I never dreamt that ... you know.’ She was close to tears, could hardly speak. ‘Do you hate me?’

He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her. ‘Hate you, Seesaw?’ he whispered into her fragrant hair. The candle hissed, flared – a sudden waxy brightening, golden light, fire always intoxicating fire to guide the skiff.

A few minutes later he began to tell her about Liam, then Daisy.

Chapter 35

Why did you stop with Gavin's hands? Think of what else the bastard deserves.

Jesse told his inner voice to shut up. Destroying Red hadn't been quite the success he'd hoped. There was a kind of internal bleeding, a seepage that continued to affect his thoughts. And sometimes he wondered ... Suppressing a sigh, he picked up his book and flipped back to the beginning of the chapter, which he'd apparently read without remembering a word. He was alone in the house, Sarah having gone to the airport to meet Katy, who was returning from the States for the start of term.

After ten minutes Jesse looked up from the page to wipe a few beads of sweat from his upper lip. The description of the Border Collie loping along a canal towpath was so vivid that Jesse could smell the steam rising from the damp earth, could feel himself getting short of breath as he struggled to keep up. For a moment he considered ringing Matthew again, but their last conversation had been very difficult.

'Matthew, you know how –' he'd tried to say.

Matthew had cut him off. 'Not now. Not yet.'

And Jesse had glanced down at Nubi, sprawled nearby with his tender underbelly exposed.

'OK,' Jesse had muttered into the phone. 'I understand.'

An hour or so later, Jesse gave up on the book. He rose and stretched, then went to the kitchen for a glass of milk and a sandwich, which he carried with him into the garden. Seated on the edge of the sundial, he quickly finished the baguette, sharing it with Nubi. The dog was particularly fond of the Italian rosemary salami Finn had taken to buying lately, though curled his canine lip at mustard.

I should have made several, Jesse thought, but the still, hazy air was too soporific, and he too indolent, to get up and head back for the fridge. Sarah was right. He was going to get fat if he kept eating like this, Nubi too. He could hear the dog stalking through the raspberry canes near the compost heap, probably in search of another snack. Idly Jesse pulled out the top and spun it in the air. After watching it for a moment, he caught it deftly in his left hand. Purple, he decided, and grinned as it changed colour. Yellow. He continued to toss it up, each time higher, each time a different colour, each time with a different spin. Kid's games. Well, why not?

Nubi skirted Jesse with something tasty between his teeth and lay down near the pool. Jesse glimpsed the limp tail hanging from Nubi's mouth, jumped up mid-spin, and growled, 'What have you got there, you clod? Give it here.' The top struck the gnomon with a ringing note, turned blue once more, and fell into the water on the far side.

The battle over the field mouse was short, expedient, and decisive. Nubi gulped down his catch before Jesse was able to prise open his jaws. Not the best way to enjoy a delicacy, yet better than nothing. Jesse didn't see it that way. He scolded Nubi with a brief but colourful harangue, then resumed his seat. The water level in the pool, quite shallow to begin with, had sunk in recent weeks, and Jesse made a mental note to top it up from the hosepipe in the evening. He gazed at the sundial, whose bronze face dazzled him so that he could hardly make out the gnomon, much less its shadow, and he was forced to blink and look away. The gnomon was sharp and lethal as a pike. He still hadn't met Ursula, but her sundials had come simultaneously to fascinate and repel him in the same way as might a medieval instrument of torture – time's rack.

A small pale spider launched itself across open space from a spent dandelion in the grass, catching Jesse's eye, and he had to smile – so sure of its trajectory, its destination. Or content to trust itself to chance? Questions, always questions ... He bent down and snagged the spider on his finger, watched it scamper over his skin so lightly that he couldn't tell if he felt its legs or only imagined the sensation. *Warm and salty, a little rough, but not like grass at all, charged with racing jizzy current, fine hairs, loud thrumming as rhythmic as thumpers beneath the surface, a large worm perhaps, but warm?* Jesse laughed aloud in delight and set the spider down in the grass. It disappeared almost immediately from sight, one of the kwakabazillion specks of life with which humans, for the most part begrudgingly or unwittingly, share the planet. And each and every one of those specks replete – *glorious* – with being.

It amused Jesse to light his cigarette without matches or lighter, and he was surprised to find that it even tasted different – not better, just a little more resinous. Only as he returned his cigarette packet to his pocket did he remember the top. He stared into the pool but there was nothing in the water; the top must have fallen to the grass. The sun warm on his neck and back, he was feeling sleepy. I'll look for it, he told himself, as soon as I finish my fag.

He watched the glowing tip of the cigarette, the curling wisp of smoke, the lengthening ash which eventually dropped off into the grass; in fact he watched more than he smoked. There was something deeply satisfying about looking at the simplest things, really looking. Shed preconceptions, shed expectations, shed the *self*, and the world becomes magical again. He remembered the wonder he felt when his grandmother showed him how cream churned into butter. Or his father's games with wood. 'Close your eyes, Jes, and smell, really smell. Become that smell. Each type of timber smells different, the ash from the pine from the oak. Wood talks and tells you its name.' Funny, he could think about that now without bitterness. It hurt – it probably always would – but not with that flood of heat which had required all his energy to contain. He was beginning to recall some of his father's stories.

It hit him then, a realisation as penetrating as a baby's cry of need, of hunger – his love of words was as much his father's legacy as his grandmother's. Not everything had been destroyed by a single act of

madness. Buried in the ashes were shards of poetry, waiting to be disinterred. And feelings, once vitrified feelings ...

Lost in thought, Jesse didn't hear the sounds of approach until a voice spoke behind him.

'Such a waste, but we need to teach Andersen a lesson. He's a persistent bugger, and the shipments aren't coming through the way they should.'

Jesse cries out, drops his cigarette, and springs to his feet. The air has a sudden glassy ring to it, as though it would shatter at a misstep. He turns slowly, heart hammering, to see a stranger with long white hair standing behind the pool, the cool appraising look of the art connoisseur on his face – eyes narrowed, nostrils flared, thin lips pursed in consideration. A new piece to add to his collection, if the price is right, and a certificate of authenticity guaranteed. Jesse feels mounted behind a sheet of plate glass; on display. The air winks with reflected light.

It takes a moment or two for Jesse to recover from the shock, and a moment or two longer for him to grasp that he's not seeing something real – perhaps not unreal either, but not the here-and-now of the Andersen garden on this quiet, complacent, sunny afternoon in August. He squints against the glare from the sundial, just able to make out the figures slightly off centre to his right – the tall white-haired stranger, two other youngish blokes and an older one, who are staring, not at Jesse, but at ... my god, it's *Peter* there on the bed, Jesse recognises him from Finn's photos. All at once Jesse's body is dripping sweat, he can feel it soaking into his T-shirt. He takes a step backwards, then another, though he knows he can't be seen: it's Peter and the others who are imprisoned behind time's two-way mirror. And the scene is gradually clarifying, taking on the sharp lucidity of cloudy water allowed to settle – water whose still lens magnifies the details of glistening stones and sediment, concentrates the focus of Jesse's perceptions.

Kill me. I can't take any more.

Jesse can't tell whether Peter is speaking the words aloud or only thinking them. Or whether they originate in Jesse's own head. What does it matter? Peter's desperation is clear enough. He's naked and cadaverous, his skin already as translucent as lampshade parchment. His breathing is shallow, his eyes shut. He's lying on his side, his hands curled before his genitals. It looks as though he can hardly lift his head. Jesse doubts that Peter would be able to stand, much less walk or run.

At a sign from the boss, one of the men steps forward, grabs their prisoner's arms, and yanks them away from his body. The blue top drops from Peter's fingers to the floor, where it skitters out of sight under the bed, but Jesse barely notices. Aghast and uncomprehending, he's staring instead at the bloke holding Peter's hands; despite his beard, the resemblance is unmistakable: Daniel, Mick's twin brother. One of the others moves in to help, and then Jesse recognises him as well – the fat man who'd been carrying a syringe that one time. Together they roll Peter onto his back and wind thick cords around his ankles which they attach to the bedframe, splaying his legs, then pass another rope around one of his wrists – his left one – which they secure to an iron ring above him on the wall, so that his arm is stretched at an unnatural and inescapably painful angle. His hip bones jut up like steel king poles in canvas worn thin through years of hard

use, canvas become papery and slack and chalky, which would tear as readily as ageing skin. Jesse aches to cover the sight of that sunken abdomen, those shrunken organs. Some archives should never be unsealed.

Peter makes no attempt to struggle with his captors – hopelessness or resignation or sheer frailty, Jesse assumes. Perhaps all three. Or is Peter even conscious? As if in response to Jesse's silent question, Peter opens his eyes. They're dulled with pain – and drugs, probably – but then beneath the murky film Jesse sees a ghostly flicker of pleading. Peter works his mouth and seems to mumble something, but either it's too faint for Jesse to hear, or Peter is too weak to do more than move his lips. Or too frightened: for the fat sod has walked away into the periphery, where the light reflecting off the sundial blinds Jesse's vision, but returns almost immediately bearing a knife in one hand, a knife much larger than Jesse's own, as long as a good-sized carving knife, and from the glint like a bright blue flame along its cutting edge, just as sharp.

Jesse catches his breath. 'No,' he says. 'No.' His voice strikes against the air, and he can hear the sound it makes, that first shrill crack.

Peter's eyes widen, and he turns his head weakly from side to side, as if trying to locate the source of a sound whispered in his ear, below the threshold of speech. Does extremity thin the reflective coating on the mirror? Or proximity to death dim the light enough to allow you to see a little, just a little, of the other side? Peter has the look of someone with nothing more to lose. Yet glowing deep within his pinprick pupils is a fugitive but unequivocal spark of determination. Jesse doubts that the others notice: the whites of Peter's eyes have yellowed like cheap paper, and their beautiful green now has the cloudy mottled look of antique bottles.

'What are you going to do?' Jesse cries hoarsely upon seeing the man approach the bed.

Help me.

We should geld him, boss. Like a steer. I can do it good, learned how as a kid. Or d'you want to cut his cock off as well?

Help me. Please.

The bastard smiles and lays the cold steel on his victim's groin. Peter shudders violently, an unexpected show of strength. The man runs the tip of his blade lightly along the length of Peter's penis, almost a lover's caress, then cups Peter's balls in his free hand.

Feel good, boy? Better enjoy it. It'll be the last time.

And to Jesse's horror, Peter is becoming aroused – his body's ultimate betrayal. Though not his last. His last is that he would still live. Peter closes his eyes and says nothing, makes no sound; it's Jesse who moans in distress.

Enough. The boss steps forward and gives his orders. Not now. Gag him. Which they do, quickly and efficiently with a balled-up rag and a length of black duct tape, something they've obviously done before, so practised are their movements.

Good, says the boss. He addresses the older man. Now here's what I want you to do. Take off his right hand. His artist's hand. You're the doctor. Make sure he doesn't bleed to death. I've got a use for him yet.

And then the boss smiles for the first time, a smile made of toughened glass. I wish I could be there when Andersen opens the parcel, he says.

Jesse hears the scream in his head – Peter's his own Peter's – and he acts without conscious thought, without words, without restraint. Some abominations have to be stopped.

shrieking the fireball erupts from the gnomon *shrieking* hovers for a split-second in the air *shrieking* mushrooms with *shrieking* a blinding flash of light and heat and pressuR *shrieking* to break with boundless *shrieking* through the impassable glassy bar*shrieking*rier of the past *shrieking* shock waves waves waves *shrieking* knock Jesse to the ground *shrieking* the air cascading *shrieking* in shards around him *shrieking*

As Jesse falls, he has a single brief glimpse of incandescent dancing bones – a reverse image like an x-ray branded on his retina, on his mind, on the symmetry of time itself.

Then silence.

Jesse lay still, afraid to open his eyes. He knew what he'd done. The past could not be altered without immense consequence. Or an infinite programming loop. Or could not be altered at all, and he was the ghost in the machine, and himself the paradox.

He listened to feathery sound of the wind. He listened to a bird singing its short sharp refrain, again and again, at regular intervals. He listened to a plane pass in a trombone slide overhead. He listened to the earth shift and drumble. He listened to his own lungs and heart and stomach clang and hiss like antiquated cast-iron radiators. And he thought he heard, though perhaps only with his inner ear, a ghostly *thank you* like a harmonic on the cello, reverberating to an elegiac stop within his larynx.

If the world had changed, its sounds had not. Slowly he sat up, opened his eyes, and looked round. His gaze rested on the remains of the sundial. How would he explain that to Finn and Meg? The metal warped – no *fused* – into a clump of lustreless bronze, the plinth dismembered into pieces of severed marble strewn like ancient statuary in and near the cracked ruins of the pool, now dry. He had an uneasy suspicion that the Andersen's insurance would not cover acts of – what, precisely? not God.

He got to his feet. Peter's top lay by the twisted gnomon. When he picked it up, it felt no warmer than usual, no different. But it no longer belonged to Peter, that much Jesse knew. He had finally made it his own.

And once he'd made certain that no anomaly had cracked the plinth of the known universe, he'd have to find a way to tell the Andersens. Uncertainty was fine in principle, but they had the right to learn what had happened to Peter. And even someone like Mick, to his brother.

Chapter 36

At Siggy's Jesse stopped just inside the doorway. The music surrounded him like a conversation of gossiping magpies, village women at the borehole drawing water for the day's washing. Notes spilled from the tenor sax in a voluble chatter – an old woman's toothless cackle, a high-pitched giggle, a knowing snicker, a whisper, a raucous joke, a hacking smoker's cough, a complaint, a sob. He could hardly believe that only one instrument produced such a gush of voices, and though Daniel deserved his fate – well he did, didn't he? – Jesse lingered, not keen to relate even a chlorinated version of the story. It was easy to think Mick would be far better off without his brother, but Jesse knew that families swam in cloudy waters; how well he knew it. Wading ashore together, his father had always insisted they stand knee-deep in the lake and wait patiently to scoop a drink till the silt they'd churned up settled, now settled too something in Jesse's gut. Mick was a musician, very possibly a brilliant musician – not a judgement Jesse trusted himself to make with any real assurance – and though Mick's pain would run rough and hard and swift, turbulent as any stormy river of sound, it would channel nevertheless into his music, feeding it, enriching it, and ultimately transforming it. And maybe, just maybe, with the sonorous and subterranean complexity of water, renew his belief in himself.

Why did that not seem like much consolation?

Or even likely when Jesse recalled Sarah's night-smudged face.

'Jesse.' Siggy clapped him on the shoulder, then pulled him into a crushing embrace. 'Welcome.' From Siggy it was not intrusive, nor unwelcome. 'You by yourself?'

'Yeah.' Jesse nodded in Mick's direction. 'I wanted to hear him play.'

'Watch out for that one. He's goin' saxin' with the gods.'

'Good, isn't he?'

'That good.' Siggy kissed his fingertips in a universal chef's gesture, then rubbed his belly. 'Ambrosia. Almost as good as my latest chocolate mousse.'

Jesse grinned. 'Then I'll have to try some. Is a table free?'

'Is the air? Come on, I'll put you in front.' Siggy pointed to a square table for four not more than a few metres from Mick. A small tent of cardboard marked the table as reserved.

Jesse shook his head. 'If you don't mind, I'd rather sit against the wall. When Mick finishes playing, I'd like to talk to him quietly.'

'Know him then?'

'Yeah.'

Siggy stared at Jesse for a moment, combing his fingers through his beard and working his lips as if he were tasting a heavy red wine from an unknown vineyard. A little sour.

'You're lookin' lots better, not so *hungry*, if you get my meanin'. Storm's retreatin', sea runnin' smooth. Good fishin'. That Finn knows what he's

doin'. Like my pappy, he's hauled plenty of nets. You be careful now. Don't you go capsizin' the boat.'

Siggy led Jesse to a window overlooking the courtyard. Almost an alcove, and the evening sun glazing the small table with a lustrous weld, intersected by long slanting bars of shadow from the mullion and transoms. A cobalt-blue vase held a delicate white flower, waxy like a lily though scentless. Distracted by his own feelings of disquiet – a warning from someone he respected – Jesse failed to appreciate the Vermeer-like quality of the setting. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

Siggy often spent free afternoons with his girls in museums, here in the city, further afield whenever possible. There was something timeless about the boy staring at his hands in front of him on the table, his long blond hair flowing to simple yellow from lemon and egg yolk and silvery quince, as if his image had been projected onto a canvas by a camera obscura from the past: the pearly tones to his skin, to his fingernails, to the lilac shadows under his eyes ... Siggy shivered, the islands ran strong in his blood. He regarded Jesse closely, with the same sombre attention he'd give to a child whose belly was swollen by malnutrition. In the end he did what he knew best how to do.

'I'll send over a plate of food,' he said.

Jesse shook his head. 'Just something to drink, maybe a bit of chocolate mousse. If that's OK.'

'It's *not* OK. Here, you eat.'

'I'm not very hungry,' Jesse said apologetically.

'Finn won't mind.'

'Won't mind what?'

'You're smart enough to figure it out.'

Jesse looked down again at his hands.

'Like payin' your own way, do you?' Siggy asked shrewdly, but with a note of approval in his voice.

'Yeah.'

'Listen, I *love* feedin' people, 'specially those who appreciate it. How about we call it my invitation this time?' When he saw Jesse was about to refuse, he added, 'You fixin' to insult me? Don't tell me you're a *racist*.'

Jesse grinned. 'OK.' A meal would be great, especially one of Siggy's.

'Mick expectin' you?'

Jesse glanced over at Mick, who was playing an intricate blues piece now, but whose attention seemed to be straying in their direction.

'No.'

'I'll send him over when he's done his set.'

'Thanks.'

Siggy hesitated. 'Thank me later. Mick's a damn fine musician, but my gut tells me something's wrong. And a cook's gut is *never* wrong. Not if he wants to stay in business.'

It was warm in the restaurant, and the rich food was making Jesse sleepy. He tried to concentrate on the music, but found his mind slipping its mooring, drifting into shallow cuts and overflow weirs and disused arms,

until it reached a winding hole, where it would turn back to the flow of notes, now smooth, now trickling, now fast and steep, then float away again like a booty loosed from its tow. At one point he wondered whether Matthew would let him go back to work on the narrowboat, take him out on it someday; whether in fact Matthew would ever have anything to do with him again ... a puppy? ... no, he thought disconsolately, impossible – an impertinence, tantamount to telling Matthew a life is insignificant ... replaceable ...

‘What the fuck do you want?’

Jesse looked up, then caught his breath. Mick was standing with his body angled away from the table, a large glass of coke in his hand. For a moment it seemed as though Daniel had come back for retribution. Jesse gestured towards the other chair. Mick tightened his lips, shook his head, stared at a hairline crack in the wall.

‘Just tell me what you want.’

‘I can’t tell you like this. Sit down.’ Jesse pushed his plate to one side. He owed Mick a certain amount of consideration, even if real sympathy were out of the question. ‘Please.’

For the first time Mick directed his gaze towards Jesse’s face. Their eyes met, then Mick’s slid towards the window, returned, glanced away, returned again.

‘Your music is beautiful,’ Jesse said quietly.

Mick flinched and averted his face, as if Jesse had spat at him. But he set his coke on the table, and after a hesitation, pulled out the chair and sat down. He traced a fingertip along the sweating sides of his glass.

‘I wasn’t just saying that about your playing, trying to soften you up or ingratiate myself or something. I meant it,’ Jesse said.

Mick nodded and took a long swallow of his coke. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘OK, thanks. Now what do you want?’

‘Why did you do it?’ The question seemed to ask itself, as though the room had tilted, opening a fissure from another universe through which the words dropped, carrion croak, inky black crows swooping to peck hungrily at eyes, heart, entrails.

Mick made a soft hissing sound behind his teeth. But when he picked up his glass to drink again, his hand shook slightly. His skin was sallow, green-tinged from the fading light, or perhaps fatigue; his eyes red-rimmed, faintly bloodshot. It must take an enormous expenditure of energy, Jesse thought, to play with that outpouring of almost hallucinatory power.

The silence stretched between them, taut as a bowstring drawn to the hunt, and quivering. Jesse eased his gaze towards the bench where Mick’s saxophone was lying on its side like a magnificent golden swan, wounded in mid-song – in flight.

‘I’m not going to talk about it,’ Mick said. ‘If that’s why you’re here, you’re wasting your time.’

Jesse winched his eyes back to Mick’s, reluctantly. He saw the animosity in them, the fear as well. And frozen deep within the stark blue permafrost, the secrets – the ones Mick kept from himself. Jesse inhaled sharply. He’d never realised that Mick’s eyes were almost identical in colour to his own.

Siggy brought over a plate of seafood in a creamy, pale green sauce and a basket of fresh bread, still steaming, both of which he laid before Mick, and a bowl – practically a glass chalice – of chocolate mousse for Jesse's dessert. Though no longer hungry, Jesse couldn't help himself: a huge grin of delight spread across his face.

'Go on, try it,' Siggy said.

Jesse did, Mick watching him with a faint sneer till Siggy rounded on him. 'You got a problem with someone likin' my food?'

Mick dropped his gaze, and Jesse and Siggy exchanged glances. They both recognised that Mick was a beaten soul, and therefore a dangerous – an unpredictable – one.

'It's sublime,' said Jesse worshipfully. 'A taste to die for.'

'Listen here, nobody's doin' no dyin' at my place.'

'Go back to your saucepans. I'm sure you've got heaps to do. I'm OK,' Jesse said.

Siggy laughed boisterously. He didn't seem to mind at all that Jesse knew what he was up to. He collected Jesse's empty plate and headed back to the kitchen, dancing his way past customers trying to catch his attention. The restaurant was beginning to fill up, and the murmur of voices had risen to a level of buoyancy which would float most wrecks. Jesse welcomed the anonymity: it would take a piercing voice, or a flash of gold, to be detected among all the decaying rigging, creaking hulls, flotsam, shrieking vultures, scavenge.

Jesse spooned up nearly half his dessert while arguing with himself about what he was going to say to Mick, if indeed he should be saying anything at all – no way he'd speak to that cold bastard of a father. Jesse had spent so many years in self-imposed silence that reticence seemed the natural way of things – not a choice, but an instinctive survival mechanism, like flight-or-fight, like eating. But there were packets of gluey oversweet chocolate pudding from the supermarket – and there was this. He ate another spoonful, letting the flavours – for chocolate, like all sensation, was never simple, but plural and complex and bursting with eloquence – carry him beyond mere sustenance.

He put his spoon down.

'I need to talk with you about your brother,' Jesse said.

Mick continued to chew on a piece of lobster, head bent over his plate. Jesse wondered whether Mick had heard him. He was about to repeat himself when Mick swallowed, dipped a finger into his sauce, raised his head, and stared at Jesse. Mick's eyes were hard and impenetrable, like mirrored lenses. Slowly, very slowly he licked his finger clean. His mouth stretched into a smile.

'Tastes just like her cunt,' he said.

Implacable fingers tightened the silence between them like a gut string on a cello, tightened till about to snap.

'Daniel is dead,' Jesse said. 'I killed him.'

Chapter 37

Jesse woke all at once, as though someone had tossed a bucket of cold water over the bed. For a moment he was unable to move, his first conscious thought of Sarah. He shifted his gaze from the elongated rhomboid of moonlight which fell across the floor through the half-drawn curtains and soon could make out Sarah's shape, her deep-sleep breathing. His eyes searched every corner of the room. Other than the gooseflesh which puckered his skin, all seemed normal. He pushed aside the duvet, careful not to jostle Sarah, and padded to have a look from the window. The garden was still, the night showed no sign of imbalance. But his skin continued to tell him something was wrong. He pulled a jumper over his head and carried a pair of jeans out with him into the passage, shutting the door quietly behind him.

In the kitchen he fed Nubi a handful of dog biscuits and let him out into the garden. He'd found nothing amiss in the house. Meg and Finn were sleeping soundly, there was no sign of an intruder. Jesse opened the fridge and took out a bottle of milk, then poured himself a generous amount and drank it down. After stowing the glass in the dishwasher, he held out his hand. It was steady, and the icy prickling feeling, as if it were sleeting under his skin, had disappeared. Perhaps just a bad dream, after all.

He went to the open doorway and peered out. 'Come, Nubi,' he called softly. He heard the dog snuffling from the direction of the shed. He called again, louder. How long did Nubi need to piddle anyway? He whistled once, then listened. It sounded as though Nubi had found something to eat. Another mouse? Damn that dog! He'd chomp anything he could fit his jaws around.

Jesse was about to step out into the garden when the phone in the kitchen rang. He whirled and stared at the handset. It rang again. Not the private signal. His eyes shifted to the clock. Three-twenty. Who the hell was calling at this time? Or a wrong number? The display gave nothing away: *anonymous call*.

Don't pick it up. All his instincts were screaming at him now. It continued to ring. Finn or Meg would hear if the caller persisted. Before Jesse could stop himself, he had the phone in his hand, then against his ear.

'Jesse?'

The sensation along his skin was back, only this time the sleet had turned to needles of driving snow, and the wind was gusting.

'Jesse?' The voice repeated – cold, disembodied, unfamiliar.

He cleared his throat. Suddenly he realised that in the brightly lit kitchen he could be seen through the window and open door.

'Who is this?' he asked.

A laugh. An ugly knowing laugh. A laugh that made him shut his eyes and hold his breath, to keep from melting the phone on the spot.

‘Fireboy, listen real good. Nobody messes with my hands – with me. Hear that, cunt. *Nobody.*’

Again that laugh. And then Jesse was left listening to the wind howling across the shattered and jagged edges of the night.

‘Jesse.’

Jesse swam upwards towards the light, the water rippling above his head.

‘Jesse.’

He broke the surface and opened his eyes, blinked. His eyelids were gummy. Early morning sunlight flowed into the room, warm and golden.

Finn was standing just over the threshold, door ajar. He put his finger to his lips and beckoned. Memory flooded into Jesse’s mind, and with a quick glance at Sarah, he slid out of bed and followed Finn into the passage. Jesse leaned back against the closed door in his boxers and T-shirt, first rubbing the sleep from his eyes, then combing his fingers through his hair.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Come downstairs,’ Finn whispered grimly.

On the floor near the fridge, Nubi lay in a pool of vomit, foam flecking his nostrils and muzzle. There were several other puddles scattered throughout the kitchen – dark urine, undigested chunks of meat floating in more vomit, malodorous diarrhoea. When Jesse crouched at the dog’s side, he knew it was too late. Nubi’s jaws were drawn back in a rictus of death, his eyes wide and staring, his body rigid from the spasms.

‘Poison,’ Finn said, then held Jesse as he shuddered and wept.

Chapter 38

Finn cancelled his long-scheduled trip to New York over Jesse's protests. 'So I won't sell as many books. Who cares? We won't be going hungry, not with a doctor in the family.'

Finn's joking did nothing to mask the worry at the back of his eyes. Together he and Jesse dug a grave near Nubi's favourite spot under the walnut tree, hacking and finally sawing through limb-thick roots in grim determination. Meg and Sarah joined them when the hole was deep enough. No one said much while Nubi was buried, Jesse least of all.

The last spadeful of soil in place, Jesse went right off to the unfinished job of clearing away the sundial, whose destruction Finn wasn't quite inclined to classify with broken windows; however, it was clear to everyone that Jesse was in no condition to be questioned closely. Soon afterwards he retreated not just to his room, but to a place where even Sarah couldn't reach him. Though he didn't lock her out physically – they still spent the nights together – his skin, his breath, his thoughts became so cold that it hurt to touch him. It felt like a car handle on winter days in Norway – put your naked fingers to it, and you left part of your own skin behind.

When Finn asked about enemies, Jesse looked at him blankly, as though he didn't understand the words. And when Finn persisted, Jesse shrugged. 'I already know who it is. I'll deal with him.' Disquieted, Finn tried to probe for more information, but Jesse turned back to his weeding without a word. For that was all he seemed able to do – hours and hours of labour, hard physical labour, long into the night. Sarah thought he was trying to sweat away the pain. He hardly ate, and he wouldn't shower, as if he welcomed the smell of his own sweat – as if its very rankness proved something.

After discussing the situation with Meg, Finn rang Matthew on Thursday. There too something was wrong – Jesse had not been to the boathouse in days – but Meg thought Matthew might be able to carry some of Jesse's grief. 'Matthew has a way with strays, we all know that,' she said. And though Matthew was stiff on the phone, bluntly declining to answer any of Finn's questions, he did turn up a few hours later. Even more laconic than usual, he made straight for the garden where he found Jesse forking over the compost heap. After about twenty minutes Finn suddenly remembered some tools he desperately needed from the shed, but Matthew flicked him such a severe look from under his black cap that Finn withdrew without even bothering to open the shed door. Sarah added a few choice words of her own about nosy, meddling parents before leaving for a dance class.

In another hour or so Matthew came into the kitchen where Finn, having relinquished all pretence of repair work, was hovering over a mushroom risotto and a salad he was preparing. They exchanged a couple of pleasantries but Matthew refused to stay for supper, and refused even more firmly to divulge what he and Jesse had talked about. 'Give him time,' was all he'd say. Finn bit back a sour comment about Meg's influence when he

saw Matthew attempt, and fail, to mask his sadness. He left, however, with a promise to return soon.

On Friday Jesse still ached when he woke. Mornings he felt as if someone had beaten him soundly in the night with the handle of his spade, though the soreness in his muscles did little to disguise the deeper ache. He groaned softly, and Sarah's eyes flew open. This time, however, he stared at her with unguarded, festering eyes, then crawled into her arms. She said nothing, held him close. The smell of lavender gauzed them both.

Later he showered and dressed in clean clothes. Finn was hanging out a load of laundry on the rotary clothesline when Jesse joined him. Finn fished out some white cotton knickers.

'I keep trying, but Meg just gives them away,' Finn said laconically.

'Gives what away?'

'The lacy red camisoles and thongs I buy her.'

'Yeah, right.' Jess flicked a wet T-shirt at Finn, who dodged to avoid a stinging reprimand.

'You and Meg,' Jesse asked, 'you still – still, well, make love?'

Finn laughed from his belly, like a good loud belch. 'What's brought that on?'

'Sorry.' Jesse seemed to be losing more and more control of his rackety tongue. 'It's none of my business.'

'Oh, I don't mind. I keep forgetting that to kids your age, anyone over thirty is old, and over forty, decrepit.'

'Rubbish. Over fifty.'

They laughed together in a shared lull between waves. For some reason Jesse felt like seizing fast to Finn, probably the better swimmer, an admission Jesse would make about few others. This Viking could probably hold him afloat in one hand.

'I'll let you in on a secret,' Finn said. 'It's like a fine cognac, improves with age.' He must have seen something on Jesse's face. 'Trust me.'

'It's wonderful sometimes,' Jesse said a bit shyly. 'Liberating. It dissolves everything – not just time and place, but my skin and bones, my head, my sense of self.' Jesse stopped for a breath. 'But coming back hurts, like being squeezed into a pair of shoes that are too tight, a pair of wet jeans, your skin.'

Finn smiled – he remembered that intensity. 'It's always a little frightening to care about something ... someone. What you have, you can lose. It can break, or be stolen. Or it might stop fitting.'

Jesse plucked a dandelion from the grass and rubbed his fingers over its glossy yellow plush, shredding it actually, without looking up. When the stem was bare and almost crushed, he let it fall to the ground.

'I don't think I have the courage to be so defenceless.'

'Jesse, *everyone* is vulnerable when it comes to –' No, he wasn't prepared to go that far, to ratify a teenage romance with a word already used much too often, and too soon. They were just *kids*, for god's sake. '– when it comes to sex. That's what emotional intimacy is all about.'

Jesse was quiet for a few minutes, then spoke in a low rush. 'But it doesn't really work, does it? To be the other person. To escape yourself. She says something, or I do, or something happens, and you realise that no

matter how naked you are, how stripped of defences, you're still and always clothed in skin, and separate. That sense of self dissolving – it's just an illusion. Orgasm lasts for what – maybe a couple of seconds? And then you're back to wanting what you can never have. The end of loneliness.'

'But think how glorious those few seconds feel.'

Finn regretted his attempt at humour when he heard the bleakness in Jesse's voice. 'Yeah, and think how Loki must be laughing at us. Our few *seconds* of boundlessness. Of release.'

'Jesse, intimacy goes far beyond sex. Despite all the conflicts, which are unavoidable, a good relationship makes it a little easier to sing the sun in flight.'

'Dylan Thomas never knew someone like me.'

Finn regarded Jesse soberly for a lengthy moment, an unflinching look. A *disconcerting* look.

'Meet me behind the shed,' Finn said. 'I'll be right back.' He strode away into the house.

After a short debate with himself, Jesse ducked round the small outbuilding and waited in the shaded gap between its rear wall and the fence. An overgrown lilac bush, a rhododendron, and a woodpile in danger of imminent collapse – something else to take care of – screened the neighbouring garden.

'Jesse,' Finn said.

Jesse turned, then stared. Finn was holding a pistol in his hand.

'Here, take it,' Finn said, holding it out.

Jesse accepted it gingerly. 'It's loaded?'

'Not much use if it's not. In my line of work – well, sideline – surprises can be rather unfortunate.'

'What am I supposed to do with it?'

Finn stepped back towards the fence, sturdy chainlink, and scuffed his foot through the leaf mould and loose chunks of bark near the lilac. 'This is Sarah and Peter's pet cemetery. An old tom, guinea pigs, a couple of tortoises, certainly a bird or two, tropical fish even. And Peter's dog Surfer.'

'I didn't know you'd had a dog.'

'Peter's really. A young golden retriever, who doted on him, and vice versa.'

'What happened?'

Finn bent to pick up a half coconut shell that had somehow found its way under the bush. He rubbed his fingers along its rough surface, its broken edges. His fingers worked by themselves, for his gaze was fixed on a spot above the woodpile.

'Finn?'

Without dropping the shell Finn finally looked at Jesse with deep van Gogh eyes – loneliness and pain and despair, and that touch of madness.

'When I learned of Peter's death, I led Surfer out here that night after supper. She was very trusting. I didn't even need to tie her up to shoot her.'

Jesse's hand tightened around the gun. 'Sarah's said nothing about a dog.'

'We never talk about it. She and Meg think I gave her away.' Finn indicated the gun. 'Go ahead. Use it.'

'What?'

'Shoot yourself. One shot through the mouth will do.'

'You're not serious?'

'Sure. Why not? I'll bury you right here next to Surfer. No one need know. You ran off again, that's all.'

'You're fucking crazy. I don't want to shoot myself.'

'OK, then do you want me to do it for you? If you're worried about Sarah, she'll get over it in time. She's young. She'll cry for a while, grieve for a while, but then she'll move on. There's school, and there's dance, and there's friends, and eventually there'll be someone else. And in twenty years, every once in a while, but not often, when she hears a certain line of poetry or smells tobacco or is baking brownies, she'll remember the sweet crazy blond kid with his strange talents – what was his name? Jeremy? Joshua? no, *Jesse* – and wonder what ever became of him, and she might even find herself crying a bit, the way you cry at a Hollywood tearjerker where the hero gets killed in a tragic accident, maybe a fire while he's rescuing someone, but the kids will be wanting their tea, and the older lad is sweating his maths, and she still has a report to finish for work, and she needs to ring her mum, who hasn't been feeling well lately, and her husband will certainly want to fuck after the kids are in bed, and she enjoys it too, so the moment will pass and it'll be another year or so before she remembers Jesse again.'

Jesse's throat had closed. He stepped back in order to brace himself against the wall of the shed. He needed the feel of the shiplap edges digging into his skin, the solidity of wood.

'Well, what about it?'

Jesse could see the leaves of the lilac moving in the breeze, the shifting patterns of greenish light under the rhododendron. But he could hear nothing. All sound had been swallowed by whatever madness had seized hold of Finn.

Slowly Finn moved in close. Jesse held his breath. Without touching him, Finn stretched out an arm, pressed one palm flat against the cladding above Jesse's shoulder, and leaned as if his legs could no longer support him. Jesse held himself very still. He caught a strong whiff of Finn's sweat, which brought a prickle of tears to Jesse's eyes. He blinked rapidly, not wanting Finn to notice. There was no way he could use the pistol against Finn, nor anything else in his own arsenal.

Finn lifted his other hand, which still grasped the coconut shell. For an instant Jesse thought Finn intended to wield it as a weapon. Then with a snap of his wrist Finn tossed the shell towards the woodpile.

'There it is. All the truth I can offer you, Jesse. Like every one of us, you get to choose between the terrors of living or death. It's up to you, but I'd suggest giving intimacy your best shot.'

The coconut shell hit the stacked wood with a soft thump and rolled away. A kestrel keened overhead.

Jesse dropped the gun to the ground and stepped into the circle of Finn's arms. He laid his head on the older man's shoulder. His breath came in loud gasps – the end of the longest swim yet. They embraced for a long time

without speaking. Finn's skin was warm, it melted the cloth between them, the cold metallic rivets of fear, so that an indelible imprint of Finn's essence was melded like a fingerprint – a birthmark – onto Jesse's skin. While Finn also took up his share of scars.

Finn eventually released his hold on Jesse and bent for his pistol.

'You scared me,' Jesse said. 'I thought you'd flipped.'

Finn smiled. 'Not yet.'

'The dog. Surfer. How could you do that?'

'Grief makes everyone a little mad.' Finn tugged at his beard, and Jesse could tell that he wanted a smoke. 'You've got to forgive yourself, Jesse.'

'Have you?'

'A bit. And a bit more each day.'

'Would you really have shot me if I'd asked you to?'

'You tell me.'

Jesse swept back his hair, which was sticking damply to his forehead. From his jeans pocket he removed his cigarettes and lighter, which he offered to Finn. 'Yeah, I couldn't have hurt you either, even to defend myself. Not you. And not Sarah's dad.' Then he grinned his lopsided grin. 'I think.'

They both laughed. Finn lit their cigarettes, and they stood for a while in silence, smoke curling between them in a holding pattern before dissipating. Then Finn showed Jesse the gun.

'Look here, it's got a safety catch mounted on the slide.' He demonstrated how to push the lever into the fire position. 'At some point I'll teach you how to shoot. Useful skill, though I hope you'll never actually *need* it.' With a decidedly provocative glint in his eyes, he struck the Zippo again. 'Unlikely, eh?'

'What you said about Sarah –' Jesse began.

Finn snapped the lighter shut, cutting off the flame. 'I know it hurt, and I'm sorry for that, but it's part of the truth. Or what could be the truth. We'll have to see.'

'If there's nobody to remember us, were we ever alive?'

'Herregud, you ask the damndest questions. Why don't you just take it day by day? I'm not much interested in whether someone a century or two from now knows who Finn Andersen was.'

'That's because you already know who you are. And that you'll live on in Sarah and Sarah's kids.' Jesse was proud of himself – his voice was very steady over the mention of her future.

Finn walked to the area he'd cleared with his foot and crouched down. He stubbed out his cigarette, picked up a handful of rotting leaf, and crumbled it through his fingers.

'I miss him so much,' Finn said. 'You're right, you know. In sixty or seventy years, there'll only be a few photos and an old woman's memory, then nothing. As if he'd never lived.'

Jesse shivered. A flash of Sarah white-haired, wrinkled, those speaking eyes, dancer's back erect as ever, still beautiful – foreknowledge? memory? imagination? Perhaps it made no difference. Are we not already mortal ghosts?

'He lived,' Jesse said. Now, he thought, tell him now.

But Finn rounded on Jesse, suddenly fierce. 'Then live for him. You know your Dylan Thomas. Don't ever give up. Live, and rage, and go out blazing.'

Chapter 39

A few hours afterwards Jesse was seriously annoyed with himself for letting Sarah drag him to this party. 'It's not really a club,' she'd said, 'just an end-of-the-holidays sort of thing, all my mates will be there, Katy, everyone, you'll get to meet a lot of people, please come.' He knew she longed to go, and knew she wanted to take his mind off Nubi's death, and Daisy's, so he'd given in. She kissed him then, and he buried his hands in her electric cloud of hair. For a moment it had felt so good – so real, so free, so safe – until his memories flooded back.

The air was dense, filled with smoke, and the stink of spilled beer and sweating bodies, and the cloy of perfume and aftershave and hair gel, all mixed together with another, more sinister smell. Jesse tried to put a name to it, but all he could think of was desperation. These kids were driven, frantic to escape the senselessness of school and parents and money, lots and lots of money. He lit a cigarette then stubbed it out after a drag or two. For the first time in weeks an iron band had started to tighten around his temples, and his vision was even a touch blurred. If he didn't leave soon, there was a good chance he'd be sick.

Jesse fought his way through the throng and the brutal pulse of the music. Sarah was dancing with a tall, older-looking bloke in battered jeans and a soft leather vest. His hair was long and straight and black, his eyes the jet and tilt of the Orient, and he had a thin nose, even thinner lips, and a very studied stubble, as if he were a French film star slumming for fresh young blood. Jesse realised that most women would find him extremely good-looking – sexy, Jesse supposed grimly. His heart began to pound as he saw how Sarah danced, and how this character watched her. She should never have worn that silvery spandex top; the heat had pasted it to her skin like a cheap swimming costume, every detail of her anatomy on public display. As Jesse approached, the would-be film star moved in very close and with a faint smirk pinched one of Sarah's nipples hard enough for her to gasp, lose her chill, and take a step backwards. But she didn't leave. Don't get angry, Jesse told himself. Keep a low profile. There's no problem.

Jesse gave the man a small nudge. His face paled greenly, and he put a hand up to his head. Without a word he turned and pushed towards the edge of the dance floor, stumbling and bouncing off gyrating bodies, then staggering on again like an eccentric billiard ball, finally coming to rest by lurching against one bloke who grabbed him and from the expression on his face seemed to be swearing violently. It was hard to tell from here. A few steps away from Jesse, Sarah watched as her future superstar vomited on the spot, splattering not only the lad who'd caught him, but his girl as well, who jumped back and retched visibly, shuddering with disgust. Her bare belly and navel piercing were now splashed with puke. The band continued to play, and the strobes flashed in nauseating spasms of colour.

Sarah rounded on Jesse. 'You didn't have to do that! I was perfectly all right.'

Sweat broke out on Jesse's forehead. He was overtaken by a fit of shivering so strong that he had to clench his teeth to keep them from chattering. Her anger forgotten, Sarah took his arm.

'You're ill.'

He nodded, unable to speak. He leaned heavily against Sarah, who led him slowly towards the small brightly-coloured tables scattered like confetti at the fringes of the room. Jesse floundered more than once, nearly dragging them down. When she finally had him seated, she examined his face in dismay. His eyes were ringed in black, and his skin the colour and texture of old suet, and slick with sweat. He shut his eyes and leaned his head against the wall.

'Stay here,' Sarah told him rather unnecessarily. 'I'll be right back. I'm going to fetch some cold water for you.'

He spoke without opening his eyes. 'Wait. Don't go. Something's wrong.'

'I won't be long,' she promised.

Jesse sank into a doze – or something closer to a fugue state. Disjointed images floated in and out of his consciousness: skewed contorted faces, red and orange screams, a strong pungent odour that slid into his mouth and down his throat like an obscene tongue. Lines of flame zigzagged through his flesh, lacerating, tearing. 'No,' he muttered. 'No.'

'The band's not that bad,' a familiar voice said.

Jesse opened his eyes, slowly, his lids struggling with the weight of the coruscating lights. He squinted at the figure behind the voice. Tondi? Her image rippled and heaved and broke into pieces of coloured glass, then flowed together again. Tondi.

'What do you want?' he managed to croak.

'You're green as mouldy bread. A bad hit?'

Jesse licked his lips. It wasn't worth making the effort to answer. Where was Sarah? He needed a glass of water. He needed her.

'Here, drink this.' Tondi was carrying two glasses of coke, one a good half-litre. She handed the smaller glass to him and sat down opposite. 'Go on, you'll feel better.'

He drank it down. It had an odd metallic taste, like a cheap aluminium spoon. Jesse shivered – all the signs of an impending migraine.

'Got a fag?' Tondi asked.

'Leave me alone,' he said, but laid his packet on the table. She shook out a cigarette, lit it with a disposable lighter from a pouch at her belt, inhaled. Eyes bright, she slipped off a shoe and lifted her foot to his lap. With a mocking smile she flexed her foot, then rotated it first in one direction, then the other. Jesse's eyes were riveted on her smoke rings, which seemed to taunt him, draw him into their midst. The air was thick, suffocating. The circles grew larger and more insistent. Suddenly she increased the pressure. He inhaled sharply at the familiar response, despite his revulsion.

'Stop,' he said hoarsely.

The room swam in and out of focus. Jesse closed his eyes and balled his fists, trying to fight the nausea, the waves of sensation from his groin, the heat.

Just when Sarah needs you most.

Sarah.

He tore his eyes open and shoved his chair back against the wall, staring at Tondi. It took every ounce of self-control not to torch her on the spot.

'Something's wrong. Sarah needs me,' he gasped.

In his eyes Tondi saw a depth of feeling –an intensity – that made her profoundly uncomfortable. For a moment another Tondi took possession of her, a Tondi who still believed in long ago and far away, in happily ever after, a little girl whose dad had not left one morning with a suitcase and an album of memories, who didn't use sex as loose change – a Tondi who was ashamed of what she'd just been doing. She dropped her cigarette onto the floor and ground it out.

'Look, I'm sorry. I've made a mistake. Mick said to be sure to keep you ... to get you ... I mean, the coke ...You'd better go find Sarah, they wanted to try –'

'Where is she?' he cried.

'I don't know exactly. Maybe the back. There are some storerooms, an office.'

Jesse staggered to his feet. The band was playing a slow song, a low throbbing beat, bodies clung and fused and slid over one another.

Sarah. He had to find Sarah.

Smoke swirled languorously through the room, now masking the dancers, now parting to reveal an embrace, a styled pallid face. Intersecting blue beams sliced through the turbid haze, fingering first one victim before moving on to the next. Body parts appeared and disappeared in grotesque flashes.

He had to find Sarah.

With agonising slowness Jesse began to make his way through the crush. The air was stifling, and he could hardly see for the smoke. Even more kids were dancing than before. The room was crowded ... overcrowded ... packed to the salty brim. And the music ... hypnotic, numbing, narcotic ...

Jesse

He could barely tell where his body left off and the music began. By now the band had launched into a fast number again. The speakers howled. Loud ... so loud ... The sound buffeted his senses.

Jesse

'Jesse,' she was crying, and he heard.

A surge of adrenaline. Heart racing, he ducked his head, hunched his shoulders, and charged through the last cluster of dancers to break free into the corridor off the bar.

'What the fuck –'

Jesse elbowed aside a bloke carrying three cokes by the neck, hardly registering the shattering bottles and spraying liquid. Jesse slipped, landed on a knee, sprang up. Vaulted the kid he'd felled. Heard the curses from a great distance, his ears filled with Sarah's desperate cries. Pounded his way down the corridor, rage mounting like lava in his gut. He'd cremate them if they'd touched her. Hurt her.

Jesse burst through the door into the storeroom, the flimsy bolt giving way under his foot. Gavin had Sarah on the floor. Mick leaned against a wall, eyes glittering, arms crossed.

Jesse was on Gavin in an instant. Kill him, a voice whispered in his head. Jesse grabbed Gavin with both hands, heaved him into the air, and tossed him like a sack of offal against the wall, noting with grim satisfaction the loud bone-jarring thump. Mick was already half through the doorway, he knew what Jesse might do. Could do.

‘Are you OK?’ Jesse asked, kneeling at Sarah’s side.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. Quickly Jesse smoothed back her hair, brushed his lips over her temple.

‘I’ll be right back,’ he said.

Mick and Gavin were at the end of the corridor, heading for an emergency exit. Another few seconds, and they’d be away.

The fireball struck the wall just as they made it out into the night air. A dull whump, more a sucking sensation than sound. Ceiling-high flames immediately enveloped the far end of the passage. Oh shit, Jesse thought. He hesitated for a fraction of a second. He would never know if he heard Sarah’s call, or merely imagined it. There was no question of a conscious choice, and no time for one. He raced back for Sarah.

‘Come on, we’ve got to get you out of here.’

He scooped her into his arms and carried her at a run down the corridor towards the dance floor. She was staring over his shoulder in horror at the flames. He set her down.

‘Look, we mustn’t cause a panic. That’s always worse than the fire itself. Just make your way outside. It’ll be OK. I’ve got to go back and deal with the blaze.’

She glanced fearfully behind them. They could both feel the heat, smell the noxious fumes. An old building.

‘Now!’ he cried, and pushed her towards the crowd.

‘Jesse –’

‘For god’s sake just GO!’

She went, and he turned back towards what he – again – had wrought.

It had become a conflagration. And the air already too thick, too acrid, too *deadly*. How had it spread so fast? For a moment he was stunned, unable to think. Then, numbly, he asked himself how many exits there were. Two, maybe three. Possibly one or two more. For what? three hundred? four hundred people? If he didn’t do something *now*, a lot of kids were going to die. Trampled to death. Suffocated.

Had Sarah left?

He moved towards the blaze, forcing himself to concentrate. The flames abated a little. He could do it.

Had Sarah escaped?

Then it happened – what he most feared. Someone began to shout: ‘Fire! Fire!’ The cry was taken up by ten, then a hundred shrieking voices. ‘Fire! Fire! Fire!’ Bestial voices, driven by terror. ‘*Fire! Fire! Fire!*’ The band choked off in the middle of a chord. The speakers crackled ... hissed ... Someone

spoke, but Jesse couldn't make out what was being said over the noise of the shredded, panicked throats. 'FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!' Screams of fright pummelled his ears, fists of sound as bruising as the bodies pushing shoving kicking clawing towards the exits, or where they thought escape would be. 'FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!' His concentration shattered, Jesse tried to fall back behind the crowd but found himself swept along by its mad inhuman rush. Black smoke was pouring through the building. A flickering red glow lit one of the walls. His eyes stung. A hand gripped his hair, jerked his head to the side. Other hands punched him in the back. He gasped. A terrible roar filled his head. Where was Sarah? *Where was Sarah?*

Somebody shoved Jesse hard. He seemed to take forever to fall. Over and over he tumbled, there was neither up nor down nor forward nor back nor yesterday nor tomorrow. His mind lost its hold on the centre. Sarah was gone, lost. No, he was lost. A heel ground into his hand. He cried out in pain, in hopelessness. What was he doing on the floor? All for nothing. Better just to lie there, nursing his throbbing hand, waiting for oblivion, almost welcoming it. Death by smoke inhalation was painless ... his family hadn't *suffered*. Jesse, where are you? It's hot, too hot. Jesse! He closed his eyes, curled himself into a ball, sank back into memory. He could never save them all.

Do not go gentle, the voice whispered. You can do this. Now get up.

He shook his head weakly. Can't – not strong enough. Not like Sarah. Vikings don't give up. She'll keep dancing into that good night. Unless she dies tonight. *Dies* ... the word jarred him from his lethargy. Sarah had given him what he'd once thought impossible. Sarah. She kissed him softly. Slowly she raised him to his knees, then his feet. And further ...

A series of muffled explosions shook the building. The fumes and panic were beginning to take their toll, Jesse realised in anguish – the press of bodies had lessened. Sharp gunshots resounded in a loud volley overhead. Jesse looked up – no *fuck no* the wood in the old building was cracking from the heat and pressure. Then with a deep rending sound like Grendel's lunatic howl – a monstrous death rattle that would echo for years to come and tear the psychic fabric of the city – a section of ceiling came crashing onto the frenzied mass of bodies, followed by two or three lengths of wooden beam and a shower of bright deadly sparks. The lights went out. But not the screams, the cries, the groans, the strangled whimpers...

It had to be now. The entire rear wall of the building was alive with flames. He would not let her die. *He would not!* For a split-second he thought he heard Emmy's voice once more. Jesse, where are you? It's so hot ... Terror greater than any he had ever known seized him. *Jesse* ... He was running through the night ... running along the river ... always running... *Jesse* ...

Not Emmy, but Sarah.

She's alive! he thought with a surge of exultation as transforming as a vision, as powerful as the inconceivable energies of a quasar – and this gave him the final strength to summon the fire and carry it with him through the one gateway which stands outside all time and all space, which obeys no laws except its own: that ultimate trapdoor of the universe, which has been called by a multitude of empowering names – the expanding mind ...

Jesse revived to the sound of sirens. He lay face-down on a patch of damp ground, protected by a bush or hedge whose lower branches were scratching his back. Cautiously he moved his head. Every muscle from crown to toe ached – though not painfully, not even unpleasantly – as if he'd passed through a cosmic meat-grinder. And perhaps he had: there was not a particle of his body which didn't feel new and strange and utterly alive, buzzing with fiery and vernal charge. In some way he couldn't possibly explain, he had twisted spacetime by an imaginative leap into another pattern, slight but very real. He opened his eyes. Strong searchlights illuminated the remains of the old warehouse, now blackened and smoking, yet with most of its walls and roof still intact – miraculously, newspapers and pulpits would later claim. The fire brigade was pumping forceful jets of water at the smouldering ruin but no flames were visible. Police and emergency vehicles were everywhere, and he could make out a TV van as well. People were milling about, although the police seemed to be doing a good job of keeping the mob in check.

How many people died? Jesse asked himself. For above the cacophony of motor vehicles and pumps and shouting voices and sirens and bullhorns and cries and thudding axes and guttural oaths and rescue equipment whining and biting its way towards the next victim, he could hear the keening, the soft weeping of those who had cause to grieve.

And then, with the immediacy of a tsunami: *Sarah ...?* He was about to crawl out from under his protective cover when footsteps approached from the other side of the shrubbery. He waited, not quite sure why he didn't want to be seen. They wouldn't spot him – there were two of them, a man and a woman – unless they circled round; even then, they would probably have to come very near. In this smoke-palled night his body was just another patch of darkness. And their attention was elsewhere. He breathed carefully, trying not to stir. He could hear every word they spoke, so that a new fear took hold.

'They're looking for some kid, a runaway. Dirty blond, about seventeen.' The man.

'They think it's arson then?' Middle-aged, educated, posh.

'Yes. The Powers boy – Michael. Mick, he's called. My son goes to school with him. He told the police he saw this lad start the fire. A Molotov cocktail or something like that.'

'Who is it?'

'Some street kid with a record a mile long. History of violence. Apparently he's been staying with that psychiatrist and her foreign husband. You know the one I mean. The magazine photographer. Never trusted him, myself. I even overheard the daughter arguing with the police. Defending a fiend like that. Can you imagine?'

Sarah – alive!

'Those Swedes are way over the top. Didn't something go wrong with the son too?'

'A heroin addict. Died of an overdose a couple of years back.'

'You'd think they'd have learned their lesson. Why take some delinquent in? They're lucky he didn't rape the daughter. Or murder them all in their

beds. They're pretty well off, from what I've heard.' Jesse could imagine the woman shaking her head.

'Family money, apparently. Swedish industrialists.'

'No wonder he can afford to fool around with his pictures. But they certainly got burnt over this psycho.' The woman didn't seem to realise what she'd said.

'Some kind of new therapy, my wife told me.'

'Half-mad themselves, some of those psychiatrists. Tricked by every sob story you can imagine.' Her voice rose in parody to a nasal whine. 'Mummy beat me senseless. The old man was on the dole – he drank. I had to steal to eat. And sell a few drugs to feed my little brothers and sisters. Not my fault, is it, if I had to kill a few people.'

The man laughed, but uneasily. 'He's certainly killed enough tonight.'

And more in the same vein. Then their voices faded away. Jesse lay still, his heart leaden. All those kids ... Sarah, he thought, I tried. I wanted it so much.

After an hour or more of circling round and round the site, keeping well out of view, Jesse gave it up as hopeless. He'd glimpsed Sarah several times, Finn too. But they were never alone. Once a police officer had been speaking to them; another time Sarah was clutching Finn's arm and staring at a figure being zipped into a bodybag; the last time she was standing near one of the portable searchlights, and her expression was so bleak – her face smoke-blackened, tear-streaked, and etched with exhaustion – that Jesse had come very close to running out and gathering her in his arms. But he couldn't take the risk, for there were any number of people in the vicinity. As he watched, another girl whom he didn't recognise came over and hugged Sarah tightly. He realised with a jolt that there were entire areas of her life he knew nothing about, that he would never come to share. He hadn't even got to see her dance in a proper ballet, onstage, when dancing meant so much to her.

It was time to leave.

Chapter 40

‘Is that you, Jesse?’

Jesse whirled at Meg’s voice. He had drawn the curtains as soon as he’d come into his room and draped a blanket over the window for extra safety before switching on a light. His shower had been brief but blistering. Working quickly, he’d packed his rucksack, written a letter to Finn and Meg about Peter, and a short note to Matthew, and printed out a few lines of Shakespeare for Sarah, now folded under her pillow. Then he’d erased all his files from the laptop. On second thought he’d formatted the hard disk.

When he’d finished, he turned out the desklight, lit a cigarette, and sat down to wait. Meg would forgive him this once for smoking in the house.

Jesse had gone to the window to look out when he heard Meg speak.

‘Don’t put on the overhead light,’ he said.

She came into the room and shut the door. Jesse checked the curtains and blanket, felt his way to the bedside table, and moved his lamp to the floor before switching it on. He sat down on the bed, and Meg pulled out his desk chair and turned it to face him. There were lines of fatigue bracketing her eyes and mouth from the long hours of emergency duty. She took in the rucksack propped by the door, the neatness of the room. It already looked empty, unoccupied. Her eyes searched his.

‘The police are looking for you,’ she said. ‘They said the house was dark and no one answered the bell. I told them I’d call as soon as I knew anything.’ She gave him a wry smile. ‘Sometimes it helps to be a member in good standing of the professional classes.’

‘I’m only waiting to say goodbye to Sarah and Finn. Do you have any idea when they’ll be back?’

‘Finn rang me to say they’re on their way. They were making sure your body didn’t turn up.’

Jesse nodded. He’d be able to get away before the sun rose.

‘Where will you go?’ Meg asked.

Jesse was grateful that she didn’t try to argue with him, talk him out of leaving. He shrugged.

‘I’ve got a few ideas,’ he said, ‘but the less you know, the less you can reveal.’

‘We don’t live in a police state,’ she protested.

‘That’s not what – whom – I’m thinking of,’ he replied.

‘You don’t want *anyone* looking for you, do you?’

‘It’s best that way. You know it yourself. Sarah –’ Jesse stopped, unable to go on.

Meg was silent for a long while. The fire lay between them, burning as though it hadn’t been extinguished, consuming their lives. But neither of them spoke of it.

‘I think you’re wrong, Jesse,’ Meg said at last. ‘It’s not that she won’t love others someday. But –’

Jesse reached over and with his fingertips gently silenced her.

'Please, Meg. Haven't I got feelings too?'

He could feel her lips tremble under his touch, and she blinked her eyes rapidly until he dropped his hand.

'All right,' she said.

They both heard the car pull into the drive. Jesse rose, smoothed the bed, and hoisted his rucksack to a shoulder. 'It's safest to talk in the basement. In the darkrooms, where nobody can look in.'

She followed him downstairs.

In the hallway Sarah clung to Jesse without saying much except his name, over and over again. Then she went to wash her face and hands while Meg made them a pot of extra-strong coffee and some sandwiches. In the darkrooms Finn found them folding chairs, which they positioned round one of the mounting tables. Finn spiked all but Jesse's coffee generously with whiskey, and Jesse stirred four heaping teaspoons of sugar into his own mug. He gulped most of it straightaway, mindful that he needed the energy and not caring if he scalded his tongue. He wasn't hungry but forced down a sandwich. Now he was drinking his second mug more slowly, wondering if he should ask Meg to let him have a flask for the road, inhaling the potent steam. But the rich smell of the coffee did not quite drive away the other, more acrid odour. Sarah's clothes and hair and skin still reeked of smoke, Finn's as well.

'You'll take care of Nubi's grave for me, won't you?' Jesse asked quietly. 'Plant some flowers, a rosebush maybe.'

'We'll look after it till you come back to do it for yourself,' Finn said.

Jesse gazed at Finn, who shifted on his stool, then dropped his eyes and shifted again. After a long silence Jesse asked, 'How many died tonight?'

'Nine at the fire, some from asphyxiation, some crushed or trampled, and a half-dozen others are in critical condition in hospital.' Finn spoke evenly, but his hand shook as he sipped from his mug, and he spilled a little of his coffee while setting it back down. He didn't seem to notice.

Jesse closed his eyes for a moment. So many.

Sarah spoke for the first time. 'It was an accident.'

Jesse looked down at his hands, his face tight and inscrutable.

'Fire has a way of taking over that only a professional understands. Fire is vicious – and *fast*.' Finn pressed a hand to his lower face and kneaded – clawed – the skin beneath his beard.

'Katy?' Meg asked.

'She's OK,' Sarah said. She waited, but no one spoke. Her eyes sought Jesse's. 'You put it out.'

'Saving a lot of lives,' Meg added.

Jesse gave a bitter laugh.

'The fire-fighters are completely baffled. They've never seen anything like it,' Finn said. 'Their chief was being interviewed on TV as we left, and I caught a bit of his report. A fire of that magnitude doesn't just die off at its peak.' Finn paused to swallow more coffee. 'Fire is insatiable. It subsides only after it's exhausted its fuel. Or a greater force stops it.' He raised an

eyebrow, a hint of his old self in the gesture. 'A wonder, some are saying. A miracle.'

Jesse shrugged. 'Let them wonder.'

'There won't be any evidence,' Finn said. 'Not for something like this.'

'Does it matter? With no identity? They'll have a picnic with me. And if they ever make the connection to Ayen's facility ... They'll lock me up and throw away the key. Or worse. Whatever I am, it doesn't fit into their cosy little universe. And what doesn't fit is best removed, like a tumour. Or dissected for its secrets.'

There was no answer to this, and they all knew it.

Finn dropped his gaze to the scarred work surface, to the abrasions and cuts the years had etched into the wood. Then with a single violent movement he snatched up a pencil and snapped it in two, the sound splintering as much against their skin as their ears. Tossing the jagged halves to the floor with a soft inarticulate oath, he looked at Jesse.

'Where the hell will you go?'

Jesse gave Finn the same answer he'd given Meg.

'At least sleep for a few hours,' Meg implored. 'You're exhausted.'

'I need a headstart more than I need sleep,' Jesse said.

'You'll not get far in the middle of the night, running only on adrenaline and caffeine,' Finn countered.

They were quiet. Finn could hear the breathing of his family, of the house itself, which stirred above him like a restless giant, as if it too could not understand what was being worked under its eaves. Even Peter's death hadn't shaken its foundations, for any old house had seen its share of dying. But now ... its walls would bear Jesse's furnacings – his imprint – forever.

Finn asked Jesse for a cigarette, his words rueful. 'I seem to break all of my rules for you.' He let Jesse light it for him, inhaled, grimaced. Another long drag, then he offered it to Jesse. 'Here. I'm not even enjoying it. Want to finish it?' He pushed over an empty plate as an ashtray.

Jesse accepted the cigarette, drawing a circle in the air in front of him with the tip, then another. Everyone watched the glowing trace rather than their own thoughts. Sarah had caught a corner of her lower lip between her teeth and was gnawing on it – she'd draw blood if she continued. Jesse blew out a small cloud of smoke, which obscured his face briefly before drifting away.

After a puff or two, Jesse bent forward with a sigh, stubbed out the half-finished cigarette, rose and stretched. He rubbed the back of his neck wearily. Despite the coffee, he was tired. More than tired – drained, caffeine-razzed, even a bit feverish. How long would it be before he slept in a bed again – or slept at all?

He ought to tell them about Peter. He *would* tell them. A letter wasn't good enough.

The doorbell rang.

Meg and Finn exchanged glances of alarm. For a moment no one moved, no one spoke. Even the house seemed to hold its breath. Then Finn stood and crossed to a panel near the door. Long ago he'd had an entryphone and security system installed. He put his finger to his lips in warning, waited a

precise number of seconds, let the callers ring a second time – longer, more persistently – then pressed the button.

‘Yes?’ he asked, his voice deliberately gruff. No one likes to be disturbed in the wee hours before dawn.

‘Police.’

‘Yes, what is it?’

‘May we come in?’

‘At this time of night? Morning, actually?’

‘We’re sorry to trouble you, but we need to speak with you and your wife. It’s important.’ He didn’t sound sorry.

Finn sighed loudly. Then he signalled to Meg, who understood his cue.

‘Finn, who’s there? What do they want? My god, it’s nearly four o’clock. Is something else the matter?’ She spoke fast and pitched her voice high, as if awakened in sudden fright.

‘Look,’ Finn said, ‘can’t it wait till morning? We’ve just got to bed a little while ago. The fire, you know, at that awful party. My daughter was there.’

‘We know. That’s why we’re here.’

Finn sighed again, even louder. Jesse smiled at the performance.

‘It won’t take long, Sir.’ The other voice was younger, more obsequious.

‘How do I know you’re the real thing? There’ve been a lot of burglaries in the neighbourhood.’

‘For god’s sake, we’ve got our warrant cards.’ The older man again.

‘Just asking.’

‘That’s all right, Sir. Better to be safe.’

There was an unintelligible whisper.

‘Are you going to let us in?’

‘OK. OK. I’ll be down in a few minutes. I don’t fancy a nudist party. Just give us a chance to get some clothes on.’

Finn released the button. They all looked at each other. Now what do we do? passed in silent communication between them.

Jesse recovered first. ‘Have you got the keys to your Harley down here?’ he asked Finn.

‘There’s a spare set in my desk.’

‘Good. Will you give them to me?’

‘Why? What do you have in mind?’

‘Don’t worry. You’ll get it back in one piece.’

‘It’s your pieces I don’t feel like collecting!’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘You can stay in the darkrooms till they leave.’ Meg said. ‘They won’t have a search warrant.’

‘No, it’s best this way.’ Loki must be grinning over his dice, raffish when someone seized his chance. ‘Go upstairs and put my rucksack by the kitchen door before you let them in. Do you think you can stall them in the sitting room? Behind closed doors? I’d like to have a few minutes alone with Sarah.’

Sarah made a noise at the back of her throat – not a sob, precisely, more like a soft hiccup or a single cello note, sorrowfully drawn.

‘No problem,’ Finn said. ‘But there’s no way I can keep them from hearing the sound of the bike, unless you wheel it away.’

'That's the whole point. I want them to hear it.'

'What the hell are you up to?'

'No time to explain. You'll have to trust me.'

Finn stroked his beard while he reflected. 'OK. Centre drawer. You can't miss them, they're in the trumpet-shaped ashtray Sarah made for me one year. Keys to the garage are also on the ring.'

'Will you be in touch?' Meg asked.

In response Jesse went to her, his hand outstretched. She rose and pulled him into a hug.

'Thanks for everything,' Jesse said. 'I've left a letter for all of you, please destroy it after you've read it. And a note for Matthew. Will you see that he gets it?'

Meg nodded before whispering in his ear, 'Forgive yourself. Guilt can be a form of arrogance.' She took off her shoes and ran lightly out of the room without a backwards glance, while Jesse stared after her.

With a new set to his shoulders, Jesse turned to Sarah. His eyes held a small trembling flame. Her face began to brighten as if the day had begun again, and the fire could be prevented. Then Jesse moved towards Finn, who gathered him fiercely into his arms.

'Have you got a licence for that pistol of yours?' Jesse asked, leaning back slightly.

'What pistol?' Sarah asked.

Finn's eyes flicked towards his bottom desk drawer, so that he didn't see the brief smile of satisfaction cross Jesse's face.

'Never mind about that,' Finn said. He released Jesse and reached into his pocket for his wallet. 'You'll need some cash –'

'No, it's OK.' When Finn frowned at him, Jesse realised that refusal would only arouse suspicion. Though later on, of course, Finn would remember. It would help convince him. 'Not too much, then. You've wasted enough on me.'

'I can't imagine a better investment.'

They embraced once more – Sarah would never forget the way Jesse butted his head against her father's shoulder and dug his fingers into the thick muscles of Finn's back – and then Finn too was gone.

There was a small silence.

'You'll come?' Jesse asked.

'Do I have time to get a few things from my room?'

Swiftly Jesse crossed the room, opened Finn's desk drawer, and felt around.

'What are you looking for?' Sarah asked.

He found the gun behind a box of shortbread. Loaded, he knew, and there was the safety catch; the rest he'd have to make up as he went along.

'What is my dad – what are *you* doing with a gun?'

'It's not what you think,' he said. 'And you won't need anything, you're not going far.' He stepped towards her, dropping the weapon on the table, as he saw the light leave her face. He knelt at her side and laid his head in her lap. After a brief hesitation she began to stroke his hair.

'Jesse,' she said.

'Don't say it,' he pleaded. 'I know.'

Sarah had passed the stage of tears. If she had to lose Jesse, then there would be hours and hours to fill with weeping later on. She gathered herself together. She would not give up without a fight.

‘I want to go with you.’

‘No.’

‘Then I’ll join you in a few months, when it’s safer.’

‘Sarah, I –’ He stopped, tried again. ‘I can’t –’ Again he stopped. There were no words, and perhaps no need for words. He shivered a little, his eyes glittering. Sarah touched his forehead with her fingers.

‘You’re hot,’ she said.

He stood up abruptly, and she rose with him, her chair scraping roughly on the floor. She looked at her father’s gun.

‘I’m not going to use it against anyone,’ Jesse told her. ‘And there’s no way I’ll ever let you come to harm.’

‘I’m not afraid. Not of that.’

Muffled footsteps sounded overhead. Jesse glanced up, then at Sarah.

‘We need to go,’ he said quietly.

She said nothing, just gazed back at him intently, photographing his features, fixing them in a bath of feeling that no sunlight, no air, no moisture could ever fade. Then she stretched out her hand and traced the line of his lips, committing their exquisite tender warmth, their wondrous eloquence to memory. She continued her reading of his face. When her fingers reached his nostrils, Jesse attempted a smile, but his muscles betrayed him. A corner of his mouth lifted, then trembled. The clear blue of his eyes wavered. Suddenly his self-control broke, and he flung himself into her arms.

‘I promise,’ he said. ‘Oh god, I promise.’

They held each other as the old walls hummed a soft triumphant note. The fire was forgotten. The police were forgotten. Their bodies met as if this were the first – the last – *the ultimate* – time. He forgot Jesse; and she, Sarah. There was only them, and here, and now.

‘There’s no time,’ Jesse whispered.

‘We’ll make time.’

‘And no condom,’ Jesse protested weakly.

Sarah chuckled, then laughed aloud. It felt so good to laugh.

‘Ssh,’ he warned.

Sarah drew him close again. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘It’s safe.’ But there was nothing chaste, or safe, in her kiss.

Chapter 41

In the drive Jesse revved the motorbike, its trademark *pop pop ... pop pop* ripping through the predawn silence. A light went on next door, and as the police came rushing out to their patrol car, Meg and Finn on their heels, a curtain twitched in the magistrate's house across the road: breakfast fodder, a tasty alternative to granola; more chew.

Meg wanted to jump into the car and follow, but Finn dissuaded her. 'He'll look after Sarah,' he avowed, not entirely sure that he could refrain from interfering if given the chance. It was one thing to trust Jesse – another, to watch him in action. Don't make me regret this, Finn muttered fiercely under his breath, half-hoping the lad could read minds as well.

Sarah clung to Jesse's back. He drove slowly, wobbling a bit, weaving back and forth to give the police, and Sarah, the impression that he couldn't quite manage the big bike. Why else wouldn't he just speed away? At one point he even mounted the pavement, then after tearing up a section of neighbour's lawn, wrestled the Harley back onto the road. Once convinced the officers had seen Sarah under the streetlamps, Jesse gunned the engine and rode downhill in the direction of the river. Neither wore helmets, so that Sarah's hair streamed behind her like a banner in all its glory – a call to arms.

The air was fresh and cool, and Jesse would have enjoyed sharing the road, and the ride, with Sarah under other circumstances. Now all he could think of was how to make it to a bridge fast enough to elude his pursuers, but not too fast to outrun them entirely. He didn't trust his skill on tight turns or against unexpected hazards, though he was grateful for the instruction Finn had given him. 'We'll make a biker of you yet,' Finn had said. He'd even talked of buying a second Harley. Meg had laughed at that, calling Jesse the perfect pretext. Finn had always meant to take a lengthy motorcycle trip across the States and Canada. Another of those things they wouldn't get to.

Finn's gun was tucked into Jesse's waistband.

Jesse maintained a steady pace, riding through first one, then another roundabout, then several somnolent traffic lights. Until now they had kept to residential streets, and aside from one couple returning late from a party – the man was unsteady with drink and singing loudly – and a black jogger whose teeth flashed in appreciation as they passed, there was no one on the roads.

At the next junction Jesse was forced to slow, for an all-night bus was just making a right turn directly across their path. Jesse hit the horn and swerved round the bus, nearly skidding as he caught sight of a police car approaching, lights flashing, from the opposite direction. Sarah dug her hands into his waist. She shouted something that Jesse couldn't make out. The bus driver braked, sounded his horn, and flipped a vulgar gesture. The police car switched on its siren at the same instant as Jesse regained control

of the bike. He rode hard past the police, heart pounding, but either they were lucky or the driver slow-witted, for they were halfway down the block before the police car made a U-turn. Now there were two vehicles chasing them, and Jesse thought he heard another siren start up in the distance. But it wasn't far to the river.

The sky was lightening ahead of them. A new dawn, Sarah told herself bitterly. She tightened her hold on Jesse. His back was rigid with tension, and she could feel his heart thudding against his ribcage. Her own heart was beating almost as wildly, not just in fear of the outcome of this mad escape, but because she'd ridden pillion more than enough with her father to recognise that Jesse was nervous and uncertain on the bike. On that last manoeuvre he'd clamped way too hard on the front brake. He was usually so sovereign, so *natural* in the way he moved and swam and skated – and made love, she thought with a smile – in short, in nearly everything he did, that she found herself repeating like a litany under her breath: don't let us fall, don't let us fall. She had the strangest sensation in her lower belly, not quite butterflies nor an ache nor cramps, and if she'd had a hand free, she would have massaged her abdomen to relieve the tension.

Shop fronts, most lit against night marauders, flashed by. Jesse was avoiding the city centre, for he knew there would be more traffic and more people afoot. He didn't relish a collision, or a scene out of a blockbuster movie, with wrecks and bodies littering the street under revolving lights.

They came to an older part of the city where Jesse was suddenly confused by a warren of crooked streets, narrow alleys, and leaning half-timber houses. He'd been here before, but only on the fringes, once or twice exploring the second-hand shops. He took a right at a shuttered bed-and-breakfast, then, hesitantly, another right off the lane, which passed under a stone arch and began to curve back on itself. The road surface became uneven, and soon they were bouncing over cobblestones. Jesse was forced to reduce his speed, and he kept looking nervously over his shoulder. Finally he pulled to a halt at the kerbside. The sirens still sounded, but no longer right behind them.

Sarah worked the knots out of her shoulders and arms, then looked round.

'Do you know where we are?' Jesse asked.

Sarah nodded. 'I think so. More or less.'

'Far from the river?'

'No.' She pointed down a winding street. 'I think we'll be OK if we take that lane. We need to head downhill no matter what. This is the oldest part of the city. We're maybe ten, fifteen minutes from the Old Bridge.'

'Not Matt's place and the boatyards?'

'Nowhere near.'

'Shit. I was heading for the bridge near the Esplanade. You know, by the concert hall.'

Sarah shook her head. 'That's a good kilometre further south. But this is even better. We should be able to lose the police in here. Let's hide somewhere and wait till they've given up.'

'That's exactly what I don't want.'

Sarah stared at him. 'You're mad. I thought you wanted me to help you get away.' And to bring the bike back, she said to herself. Finn had taught her the basics, too.

A girl listing under a large canvas bag full of newspapers came round the corner, eating an apple. She stopped when she noticed them.

'Something's up,' she said, waving her hand in the direction of the sirens. 'See anything?'

Sarah smiled a friendly greeting. 'A couple of patrol cars passed us on Morton Road. An ambulance too. Must be an emergency.'

The girl dropped her bag onto the pavement, and mirroring Sarah's movements of a few minutes ago, swung her arms to ease the stiffness in her shoulder. She grinned, then took a bite out of her apple.

'Out early, aren't you?' she asked curiously. 'There are only the regulars about.'

'Yeah, we're heading into the country for a day trip, but we're a bit lost. What's the best way to the Old Bridge?' Sarah asked.

The girl gave them directions. She seemed inclined to linger, but Jesse nodded, muttered his thanks, and headed the way she'd told them. Once she was out of sight, however, he turned left and then left again, away from the river and towards the distant sound of the sirens till the police would be in range before long. As soon as Sarah realised what Jesse was up to, she punched him angrily on the shoulder, now furious enough to risk losing her hold, or their balance.

'What's the matter with you?' she shouted in his ear. 'Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'Just do exactly as I say,' he threw back over his shoulder into the wind.

Sarah thought it would serve him right if he did end up in prison. Then she remembered the gun which right this instant was digging into her stomach; and which, each time she was thrown forward by Jesse's erratic driving, scared her that it would somehow go off.

The sirens were much louder now. One scheme after another cartwheeled through Sarah's mind: jump off the motorcycle and force Jesse to stop; snatch the gun from his waistband and toss it into the gutter; or better yet, hold it to his thick stubborn *idiotic* head and threaten to shoot him. If she weren't so desperate, she would have laughed at her own idiocy, her insanity. What was she doing, letting him run away like this? And what madness had overtaken her parents? This wasn't the Dark Ages, or some Third World dictatorship where they tossed you into gaol, tortured you, and threw away the key.

Everything had happened so *fast*. That, and the shock of the fire – all those deaths. She shivered remembering Alex, whom she'd known since preschool, and clever, funny, *sweet* Stephen, who was – had been – a whiz at maths and had been tipped for a scholarship to Cambridge, or maybe M.I.T. in the States. Oh god. One minute they had been dancing ... and now ... she swallowed and leaned her head against Jesse's back. The wind stung her eyes.

They came to a wider, shop-lined street. After fifty metres Jesse braked suddenly and pulled into a car park, narrowly missing a row of wheelie bins whose lids were gaping. The streetlamps, still illuminated, cast a weak

yellowish glow, so that the last of the night looked nicotine-stained like an old man's crooked teeth. Empty tins, crumpled papers, polystyrene burger boxes, something wrapped in newspaper, and what might have been a pile of rags lay scattered near the bins. A cat yowled and streaked away, and Sarah thought she saw a shape like a large mouse or a rat slithering to safety. Jesse put out a foot and idled the engine. Without a word, he reached behind him and pulled out the gun with his left hand. His body was tensed, rigid – as tightly coiled as a poacher's steel trap. It defied contact. He looked in the direction of the sirens, now so strident that Sarah could *feel* the vibrations, a brazen bombardment of every nerve and cell. More of this, and her cranial sutures would crack apart like an eggshell.

'What are you doing?' Sarah asked urgently.

Jesse didn't answer – couldn't answer. He hunched forward over the handlebars and raised the weapon, his hand perfectly steady. Unable to see his eyes, Sarah could nevertheless sense their colour, honed to stiletto blue. Heat radiated from his back, singeing the fine hairs along her skin. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly filled with coppery saliva.

'Jesse,' she said.

He shook his head, muttered something unintelligible.

The sirens shrieked closer.

In a whirl of blue light and ear-splitting cries the patrol cars moved in. They weren't travelling fast; the motorcycle had disappeared, and the policemen were now trying to catch sight of their quarry. There were only two cars, but from the sound of it, a third was in the area, trawling an alternate route.

Jesse waited until the cars were nearly abreast.

'Now.'

Jesse fired a shot at the nearside wing of the first car as it drew level, then another into the air. It was enough. The police car swerved but recovered quickly; it had only been nicked. The driver in the car bringing up the rear was able to brake in time. Jesse shouted for Sarah to hold on, gunned the motor, and sped in the same direction. The Harley quickly overtook the patrol cars. As Jesse flew past them, he brandished his gun openly, then managed to stay on the road while he tucked it away again.

The road dipped downhill, past a church set behind a low brick wall. The sun was just beginning to flush the sky, and the mossy red bricks glowed with the first light. Jesse took care on the descent, yet still just narrowly avoided a crash when the bike juddered over a pothole. They could see the river ahead of them now, flowing soberly beneath the humped shape of the Old Bridge and past the narrow bank where flea-market stalls jostled for breathing-space on the first Saturday of every month. A few small boats were moored at the stone jetty. It might easily have been a scene from an impressionist painting – another, almost foreign city.

But then Jesse reached the bridge and recognised the spot where he'd slept, and a bit further on, the place he'd met Sarah. He hadn't been back since that morning in July. If he'd had time to think about it, he might have found something fitting – ironic even – in the coincidence. Only there was no time for him to reflect (and neat solutions were a little too contrived for his taste, for his brand of subtlety). The police were nearly upon them.

The bridge was indeed several hundred years old, with cracked and lumpy tarmac covering the once glittering paving blocks of local sandstone. The five-span structure was high enough to allow for most river traffic, its centre span nearly twice as long as the side spans, and considerably higher. Stone cutwaters protected the piers. But this was not a main thoroughfare for motor vehicles. Instead of a crash barrier, a simple iron guard rail had been set above the original parapets – the whole not much more than waist high. As a concession to modern needs, a narrow walkway, too meagre to be called a pavement, had been added in recent years, but the bridge was still wide enough for two-way traffic – in a pinch.

Jesse rode straight to the middle of the bridge. There were no pedestrians, and no cars, although a dirty white pickup – a Renault, he thought – and a delivery van could be seen approaching along the road on the opposite bank; and close behind, police cars racing to the scene. Jesse smiled in satisfaction.

‘Get down, Sarah.’

Sarah sprang from the bike. Jesse switched off the engine but left the key in the ignition. Then he too dismounted, holding the Harley upright while he scanned the bridge. ‘The kickstand,’ Sarah reminded him. He grabbed his rucksack and slung it over a shoulder.

‘Remember, do exactly as I say,’ he said.

‘I’m not going to stand by and let you –’

But Sarah didn’t have time to complete her sentence. Jesse whirled her around, threw his arm across her neck, and held the pistol to her head. Then he dragged her a few metres from the motorcycle. He couldn’t tell if they were being observed with binoculars or a scope. Sarah was too stunned to protest.

‘Stand in front of me with your back to the wall,’ he said.

Jesse released her for a moment as he straddled the cast iron rail, his shoulders sloping under the weight of his rucksack. Her breath caught in her throat as she turned her head to gaze at him, his face pale – ethereal almost – and his hair wild and wilful and beautiful as ever in the early light. A brisk breeze off the river stirred it, and an incongruous thought swept through Sarah’s mind – I should cut it again. Sudden tears misted her eyes.

‘Sarah,’ he said – an admonition, a plea ... a promise?

Against her better judgement, Sarah blinked away her tears and did as he asked. She had run out of ideas. Why didn’t he tell her what lunatic trick he was about to pull? One thing she was sure of – he would never hurt her, or let her come to harm. Leaning against him, she shut her eyes and allowed herself to drift back to the darkroom, to remember the last quiet minutes they’d had alone. His arms around her, his lips, his skin ...

‘Sarah! Stay with me now.’ Jesse’s voice was low and urgent. She was swaying a little, and he couldn’t afford for her to collapse or panic at a crucial moment. ‘I know you’re tired. Overwhelmed by everything. It won’t be much longer now. I promise.’ He looked quickly left and right, assessing the risk. But what did it matter if they saw? He knew what they would assume. He brought his arm round her neck again. The gun rested on her breast. He bent his head, lifted her hair with his hand, and brushed his lips along the

nape of her neck. 'I promise,' he repeated in an entirely different tone. He could feel her shiver.

'Sarah?' he asked.

'I'm all right.'

Jesse transferred the gun to his left hand. The parapet was broad enough for him to kneel. He brought his other leg over the guard rail, finding a position he could hold comfortably for a while. Nothing stood between him and the river.

Three police vehicles and a van, sirens wailing and lights flashing, sped onto the bridge from the direction that Sarah and Jesse had come, but slowed almost immediately. The first car swung across both carriageways, barring the road, and stopped. The other two drew up just behind, angled with front-ends meeting so that the barricade was complete. Undoubtedly armed response units, possibly manned by specialist firearms officers. The van came to a halt at the rear, while a second van remained on Old Bridge Street, blocking access to the bridge. Two additional patrol cars pulled up on either side of the second van, from which policemen emerged to redirect traffic, which was beginning to pick up. More patrol cars and several motorcycles could be seen down below on Charles Quayside, the narrow cobbled street hugging the riverbank.

On the opposite shore four squad cars and a third van had now reached the bridge. Two remained behind along the access road. It didn't take long for the others to race to the scene – lights coruscating, sirens screaming, brakes squealing – and take up their positions. They also refrained from crowding Jesse. He could see clusters of onlookers gathering on both banks, even at this early hour. Policemen were having no trouble keeping them back, however, for their numbers were still small, and most of them had got out of bed within the last few minutes. The media had not arrived yet. It was just after dawn, and once the drivers turned off their sirens, surprisingly quiet.

The police had effectively placed a tight cordon around Jesse and Sarah.

For a moment nothing happened. Sarah had the strangest sensation that this was all a bad dream, a nightmare. Her lids were heavy. If she could just manage to raise them, the chase scene would be replaced by the walls of her bedroom, her warm duvet, and Jesse's arm draped drowsily across her shoulders. It was still cool. The sunrise glazed the pale morning with red.

'Drop the gun.'

Jesse's arm tightened around Sarah's neck. She could smell the warm cinnamon of his skin, overlaid by the faint but not unpleasant tang of his sweat. His breath was on her hair, against her neck. Her heart was beating loudly; his as well, barely contained by the wall of his chest.

'Jesse,' she whispered, 'please.'

'It's the only way,' he said. 'Tell Finn ... tell them I'm sorry. Tell them it's what I deserve. Tell them it's the only way to stop the fire.'

And then she knew.

'No!'

There was only one thing Jesse could think of to say to her, and no time to say it. Not here, not now. He remembered the lines he'd typed, Shakespeare's lovely words: *when I wak'd I cried to dream again*. He

whispered them under his breath. How had things gone so wrong? He rested his cheek on the crown of her head, then sagged against her in sudden weariness, in desolation. He felt her stiffen, not in protest, but to support his weight. For a moment he wondered if he should give it up, relinquish the gun and let them bring him in. He was so *tired*.

'Throw the gun down and let the girl go,' a voice ordered.

Jesse lifted his head and stared round. Then he straightened his back, stretched and rotated his shoulder blades – *my wingblades*, Emmy used to call them. The rucksack dragged a little on one shoulder. He slipped his right hand into his pocket to feel for the top. Still there. In order to ease his muscles, he shifted his weight from one side to the other, raising each leg slightly off the parapet. He would have liked to rub his knees, the back of his neck, but made do with these surreptitious measures. They would be observing him closely. And the fire – he stoked it now, not much, just enough to reassure himself. Thunderbolts wouldn't liberate him from this situation, not in a century of silicon gods. He would not legend the world for them. Let them come to it themselves.

Men wearing protective body armour and helmets were swarming from the vans, all variously armed, all carrying shields. They scattered to prearranged locations. Two men, presumably sharpshooters, already crouched in position, one to Jesse's left, one behind the open door of a car on the right. They were at least fifteen metres away. A policeman with two dogs on leads waited by the van blocking Old Bridge Street.

The officer in charge of the operation had alighted unhurriedly from his vehicle. He was of medium height, smooth-shaven, his cropped hair mostly silvergrey, tanned, fit; he could have easily been a TV cop, except for the slight stutter. He carried no visible firearm and wore a bulletproof vest. A bullhorn dangling from his right hand, he stood in front of his car, careful not to make any threatening gestures. Jesse could see that the man wasn't wearing an earphone. Wasn't that standard procedure? A maverick, maybe.

'I'm unarmed. Let me come and speak with you,' the man said.

He placed the bullhorn on the ground, lifted his arms above his head, and pivoted slowly in place. Leaving the bullhorn where he'd placed it, he ventured a step or two closer.

Jesse called out to him, 'Stop right there.'

The officer did as instructed. He addressed Jesse again, his voice now clear and confident and measured; he'd got his stutter under control. This was an educated man. He had been well-trained for such incidents. Jesse wondered briefly whether the speech impairment had been deliberate, a way to disarm his suspects.

'Why don't you tell me what you want? I'm certain we can come to an arrangement.'

Jesse said nothing.

'You're Jesse, aren't you? My name is Richard, Richard Howell. I'm Chief Inspector. You can trust me.'

Jesse laughed.

'Let Sarah go and no one will shoot. If there's a problem, we can talk about it. There's no need for anyone to get hurt.'

Jesse didn't reply.

Howell took another step forward.

Jesse waved the pistol and called out, 'No further. Or I'll kill her.' He held the gun to Sarah's head.

She had to try. 'No! He doesn't mean that. You've got to stop him. He wants to –' Jesse clamped his hand round her mouth and shook her head roughly. 'I'm warning you, I'll kill her right this second,' he yelled. Then dipped his head and hissed, 'Not another word.'

Howell stopped, holding up his hands in a placating gesture.

'Fine,' he said. 'Whatever you want, Jesse. Just tell us what we should do. We don't want anything to happen to Sarah. Nor to you.'

'I had nothing to do with the fire,' Jesse said. A lie, but as much of the truth, of himself as he was prepared to offer them.

'I spoke to Finn not half an hour ago. I expect you don't know we're friends. He's already got a good lawyer lined up for you. You don't need to do this. Nobody has to get hurt. You're young. Sarah's young. You've got your whole lives ahead of you. Put the gun down. Let's just talk.'

The thwack-thwack of chopper blades insinuated itself only gradually into Jesse's consciousness. At first he hardly noticed the low rhythmic throb, for his attention was focused on the scene in front of him. He had to find the exact moment when he could make his move. How many rounds were in the magazine anyway? There were more policemen than he'd anticipated, and it would require all of his concentration and split-second timing to bring this off. By the time he realised that they had called out a police helicopter, it was already overhead.

Jesse glanced up. Shit, he thought. A sniper had a scoped rifle trained on him from the open door of the chopper. If they shot at him from behind, would he be flung forward onto the bridge?

'If you don't want me to kill Sarah, then clear the bridge. The whole area. Once we're away, I'll set her free.'

'Jesse, these are some of the best marksmen in the country. You don't stand a chance. Not that way.'

There was a short silence.

'Think about it, lad. These men are good. So good they can shoot off a single ear or hand or testicle. Or arrange for you to be a quadriplegic for the rest of your life. If you imagine it's a merely a choice between living and dying, think again.'

There was a longer silence.

'If I let Sarah go, you won't shoot me?'

'My job is to save lives, not take them.'

Sarah was beginning to shiver again. It was time to get her to safety. It was time to end it.

'OK, I'll let Sarah go.' Jesse released her as he spoke. 'Go on,' he whispered to her. 'I need you to do this for me.' When she hesitated, half-turning to plead with him, he nudged her forwards with his free hand. 'Please, Sarah. Go over there and into the car.'

Slowly, as though dazed, she stumbled the short distance to where Howell was standing, Finn's gun trained on her the entire time. Howell whispered something to her. She shook her head and turned to stare at

Jesse. Her lips were moving. Howell signalled to one of his men, who came over and led Sarah to the car. She refused to get inside, however.

‘Now you, Jesse,’ Howell said. ‘Put down the gun.’

‘First call off the chopper. It’s making me very jumpy.’

Howell pursed his lips, thinking it over. Then he nodded and stepped back to his car, leaning down to speak to a figure seated in the vehicle – the operator in charge of communications, Jesse presumed. All at once the pressure behind his sternum ballooned, this was it, there might never be a better opportunity. Fuck the sniper. With a deep breath, Jesse braced himself as best he could, rose to his full height, took aim, and began shooting.

With a harsh cry Sarah started forward, but Howell seized her by the arm so that she lost her balance and sprawled onto the ground. He shouted, ‘Don’t shoot. Hold your fire. For god’s sake, lads, hold your fire!’ but it was too late. The noise was deafening. Sarah looked up in terror. For a fraction of a second she thought she saw Jesse gaze at her, thought she saw him smile, saw his lips move, heard him say ‘I promise.’ Then terror real terror exploded over her, the world gone red. She screamed as she saw him recoil. No. God no. There was a moment which seemed to expand to a lifeline, when the noise became whited silence, and Sarah heard nothing, not even her own screams, and the scene was happening inside her head. Then with a hoarse inrush of sound, time contracted like a womb and flung Jesse from the bridge. No. He ignited instantly in a roaring inferno, hung for a breathless heartbeat in the air, his body a human firework *no* a nuclear detonation *no* a fiery incandescent nova. Images flickered across her blurring vision ... Jesse a bird Jesse *no* Jesse ... Jesse ...

And then he was gone.

The sun was hot red ball over the river. Tongues of flame licked an obstinate truth from the dark, secret, oily waters – a deathly hush as the guns fell quiet.

‘Jesus,’ breathed Howell. He shuddered and turned aside. The boy had been a blazing torch as he fell from the bridge. He must have wired himself – that white-hot flash, the detonation which had deafened them for a few seconds. Even that bird – kestrel, wasn’t it? – almost hadn’t made it away. There would be nothing much left to recover. Only just a kid. What a screwed-up world. But Howell was a professional, and he gave the necessary orders: for boats, for divers, for a forensic team, for all the consequences of a police incident. It would be a long day.

Chapter 42

Sarah is heading for the corn circle. It's a warm golden afternoon, the first after a grey start to October, and the sidewalk cafés and playgrounds are beginning to fill. She comes often to the park. On most days she wheels the pushchair along the gravel paths she and Jesse walked that very first afternoon. Today she has a book tucked into the net along with the usual baby paraphernalia, also an old waterproof camping sheet. If the grass isn't too damp, she'll stretch out on the ground, get through that chapter for history.

She missed some school last year, but not much. There had been private tutoring, and with her marks she was allowed to sit most of her exams late. The rest she'll be able catch up, in the end she'll finish with her year. These are modern times – a single parent, a teenager, shouldn't have to suffer. Her parents know how to exploit the system. And in school she wears her motherhood like a badge of honour, a test passed.

October is a country month, one of the best. Maybe at the weekend Meg will drive them to Gran's. Some of the apples will be ready for picking, fragrant bunches of lavender hang under the eaves – Gran has bought almond oil this year for infusing – and there's always jam to be made. The sweet, sharp tang of quinces simmering in the kettle would permeate the whole cottage. Sarah smiles to remember how she and Peter used to fight over the scrapings.

The baby needs country air – Sarah, even more so. At five months the baby still sleeps in Sarah's bed, wanting only a nice long suck to settle. It isn't quite so easy for Sarah. She's been dreaming of Jesse again, though never as vividly as the night the baby was born and lay next to her in that tiny cot.

The path ahead is thronged with people, which Sarah doesn't mind as long as she can find a quiet corner. After the fire, she needed months to be able to walk into a crowded room without beginning to shake. And she still avoids large enclosed spaces like shopping malls, the school auditorium. She hasn't been to the cinema since that one time with Jesse. And she's just begun her first dance class a few weeks ago, though she's not keen to perform onstage again.

Occasionally she meets with someone from school for a coke or bit of TV, but mostly she prefers to be on her own. Having a child has changed her in more ways than she could have ever imagined ... having had Jesse ... Aside from teachers and exams, there isn't much she has in common with the old crowd, even Katy. But she misses Thomas, who left for New York at the beginning of term.

Talk has died down, yet the fire still smoulders in everyone's memory; the fire, and the boy who set it, and Mick. Sarah was insulated from the gossip for a while – her parents sent her for six weeks to her grandmother in Norway – but upon her return she soon got wind of what was being said at

school, and her rage was cataclysmic. It took three blokes to pull her off the girl. With her mum's help, Sarah has come to understand that, deep down, she's angry at Jesse (and herself), not the stupid kids who have no idea what they're talking about. She doesn't really blame them any longer – well, not much – when she thinks about it rationally. They all know someone who died in the fire. Why should they doubt Mick's version of the story?

Finn has done his best, but everyone knows of his vested interest in defending the boy. There was an official inquiry into the actions of Howell's elite team, which resulted in a few dismissals, a few reprimands, but not much else – certainly no prosecutions. Sarah continues to avoid Mick, not that he seeks her out. And of course, together with Gavin, he flatly denies the rape. Jesse was right all along – she should have gone to the police straightaway, when it would have been possible to submit to a few simple tests. Might things have turned out differently? The fire ... Jesse ...?

'I know you don't want to believe he's dead, but he'd never let you suffer like this without getting word to you,' Finn said soon after she'd come back from Norway. She'd been racing to answer every phone call; checking her email a thousand times a day; setting upon the post like a fix. 'At least for him it was over quickly, he didn't have to live with his guilt,' Finn added thickly, turning away.

Her parents suggested that she change schools, but Sarah refused. Her obstinacy, her pride were the only things that kept her from going under in those first months of denial and loneliness and desolation and grief; her family's support. And Thomas – thank god for Thomas. Even so, there were moments when she thought about an abortion. As soon as her pregnancy showed, she squared her shoulders and stared down any questions about the father until nobody, but *nobody*, dared to ask. It surprised her, where the strength had come from. After a while she discovered that their speculations ceased to matter. Once reasonably popular, she became something of an outsider, despite Thomas. The books she's read make it out to be lacerating, the worst kind of gaol sentence – solitary confinement. Maybe for some. But she no longer trusts simple fictions. It's as if she speaks another language, not the common tongue. She uses the same words but they sound strange, distorted – underwater. And there are still times when she sees lips move and hears sounds fill the room, but it feels like watching TV with the meaning rather than the volume switched off. She listens to music for hours. Solitude sings. She needs it, she supposes. And gradually, she's beginning to notice a certain admiration, a grudging respect – and interest – from some quarters. There are friends out there, when she's ready for them.

Christmas was very difficult, and in the end her parents rang Inge in Norway and begged her to come for the rest of the holidays. Her grandmother sat with Sarah for hours, sometimes right through the night. In her beautiful alto voice Inge sang aria after aria from her favourite operas, or sometimes those wonderful blues classics, until Sarah would finally fall asleep. To her alone Sarah showed the lines which Jesse had left under her pillow. Inge said nothing, only stroked her granddaughter's hair. No one was astonished that Inge agreed with Sarah about school. 'Don't let that serpent have the satisfaction of driving you away,' she said. 'It's a matter of honour.'

An old-fashioned concept, but Sarah found it curiously satisfying. It reminded her of Jesse.

On New Years Eve Mick and Gavin were involved in a bizarre accident. They were crossing the Old Bridge on foot with some mates, returning late from a party. It had begun to rain. Gavin had his arm around Mick's shoulders. A bolt of lightning struck them both, and Gavin spent months in hospital, so badly burnt that his charred penis had to be amputated. While Mick escaped with less severe injuries, he needed a long period of recuperation, and he'll carry the scars for the rest of his life, the ones on his back being the worst. At school everyone noticed the personality changes, the memory problems, and his difficulty in processing information, though the incoherent remarks about his brother soon tapered off. Mick's hearing was also impaired, and only recently has he begun to play sax again. He's stopped talking about the fire since the accident. No one else was harmed.

Sarah spent New Years Eve quietly with Thomas and went to bed soon after midnight. She slept soundly for the first time in months.

People move on. The fire is no longer a *hot* topic, and even Sarah can make a gentle pun about it, or tolerate the ones her father makes, to be precise. That black humour of his keeps him sane, he claims. She no longer swears at him when he says things like that. He only means that people forget, after all. And he's right. Sort of. Sometimes.

Her dad still takes overseas assignments, but not as many. In the immediate aftermath of Jesse's death Sarah was too numb to notice much about Finn's feelings, though she can clearly remember one night when he went out to the shed with a crate of old – and probably valuable – porcelain and smashed one dish after another against the wall till a neighbour rang up to complain. Since his musical tribute at Jesse's memorial service, which he was unable to finish, Finn plays his trumpet often. And even now, when she can't sleep, she sometimes finds him smoking on the patio, unashamed of the tears in his eyes.

Finn adores his first grandchild. Well, of course he would. Sarah loves to see him carrying the baby around – big bearded biker, belly a little larger, a little sloppier, hair a little greyer, with this tiny scrap in his hands. He's got his Harley back, rides it some, and is talking about a fancy sidecar arrangement for infants which he's seen featured in a magazine. As if. And her mother has finally qualified as a specialist registrar. She's been asked to join a team being put together to work with runaways, an offer which Meg is seriously considering. Sarah is sure her mother will take the job. It's a new and rather gritty programme – exactly the sort of thing Meg will love, despite the long hours. None of them has much time for cleaning, but they've hired a housekeeper cum childminder since Sarah went back to school. Jesse wouldn't recognise the house any more, Sarah thinks with a smile. He was always uncomfortable with their untidiness, though he never complained.

They talk more often now about Peter. Sometimes Matthew comes round. Still in remission, he's described Jesse's healing. As much as anyone, he's helped them to speak of the dead. It doesn't hurt any less, though it has got a bit easier. But Sarah hasn't told them about her dreams, and she keeps her suspicions about the baby to herself. There'll be time enough to worry

her parents if and when she needs to. At least the neighbour's cat won't be tempted to jump into another pram again soon.

The baby sneezes and opens her eyes sleepily for a moment, almost as if she knows that Sarah has been thinking about her. Well, why not? With a grandmother like Meg and a father like ... Jesse, Sarah thinks with a surge of anger as she stops to adjust the blanket, I miss you, damn it! You should be here to see her – to *be* with her. Sarah studies her daughter's face, her bright blue eyes. Everyone comments on how unusual it is for them to be so clear and intense already. Like Jesse's, they change colour readily. Sarah has noticed that they darken when it storms or someone is shouting – or when some heavy metal is playing on the radio. Today they reflect the cloudless frieze overhead, painted in a clean strong azure with prodigal hand.

Sarah rocks the pushchair. With a snuffle the baby shifts under her blanket, blinks, half opens her eyes. A drowsy smile touches her mouth. Then her lids drift shut, and she goes back to sleep. Sarah bends to retie a shoelace which has come undone, then pushes on. It's hard work on the gravel, but there really isn't any hurry. The baby has taught her the discovery, the pleasure of slowness.

The summer's corn has been cut, but the autumn's new growth already reaches above Sarah's ankles. The fresh green stalks thrust thin as seconds, sturdy as hours towards the sun. This year it's wheat, not amaranth (which she looked up on the internet). She wonders why the gardeners plant twice, since this is obviously a late sowing. It doesn't seem likely that many people come to the circle in winter. Another of Jesse's legacies: at one time she'd have taken the park – like so many other things – for granted, never questioning how any of it came to be. Jesse was fascinated by the park. It's magical, he told her more than once. And it's true that she feels very close to him here, where she first danced for him. Where, perhaps, she first began to fall in love with him.

I promise, he told her in the darkroom. And he never lied.

Sometimes she can hear his voice fall like spring rains, like soft music in her head. She finds herself remembering odd snatches from the madcap stories he made up for her after she was raped. Little things he said, or might have said. The way he murmured her name at just the right moment. The lines of poetry he liked to quote. And most often of all: *when I wak'd I cried to dream again*. She's read the play over and over again, searching for ... for what? a hidden message? understanding? consolation? peace? But there are few answers. She doesn't even have a photograph of him. Nothing for the baby except a scrap of verse. In her saddest moments, often on sleepless nights, it almost seems to her that it was all a dream. How could there have ever been anyone like Jesse? Then she smells his skin, the spicy sweat of their last lovemaking; rides the Harley through the early morning streets; feels his lips brush her neck; sees the bullets rip into his flesh. Why? Why had he never said goodbye there on the bridge? He knew what was coming; he had *engineered* it, goddamn him. (And she had *let* him.)

I promise ...

And those final seconds, remembering what she can remember ... so much is confused ... her mind skitters away ... the fireball ... Jesse rising like a living torch ... from the bridge ... from that woman ... a firebird ...

She knows it's wishful thinking.

'Why?' Finn choked out at Christmas, breaking off in the middle of a Norwegian carol, 'why did I let him leave?' And Meg, 'He wouldn't want you to blame yourself. I think the greatest gift we've given him has been our trust.' Her eyes rested on Sarah as she added, 'So trust him to have known what he wanted – needed – to do. Believe in him.' Sarah still catches her mum watching her, more often the baby, Meg's eyes deepening to that intense and prescient shade of gold.

Sarah stands in the centre of circle, tilts her head to the sun, and closes her eyes. It was very hot the day she danced for Jesse. Today the clouds have dropped their guard for a few hours, a few days at most. The sun will have to wait until the earth creeps close again to launch its full assault. There is still the long winter to get through. Sarah lifts her arms, swings round in a complete circle. Her hair is short now. She took a scissors to it in Norway. Sometimes she misses its heft, its anchor. When she dances her head weighs too little: she finds it affects her sense of balance. She's having to relearn how to hold herself.

She makes another windmill, then another.

She doesn't miss the stage. She's always danced more for herself than others. Except that day in the park – even then she wanted to entice Jesse, to capture him, hadn't she?

Jesse, she thinks as she makes another turn, I'm still dancing. She blinks back the luxury of tears and slows to a standstill, a little dizzy.

Once the world steadies, Sarah checks on the baby, whose soft downy cheeks are flushed above the blanket. Her eyelids flutter, she must be dreaming. Sarah looks down on her as only a new mother can look at her infant. Then she slips off her trainers and socks. She wants to feel the earth beneath her feet. The grass is cool and wet and springy; the ground swollen with stored life. Sarah circles the pushchair, then pauses to rock in place and wriggle her toes. She looks round. There's nobody in sight. She begins to dance.

In her head she hears the first notes of Fauré's *Elegy*, which friends of Finn's played at the memorial service. Finn gave her a copy of the CD after he tired of searching for his own disc. The deep sonorous notes of the cello sound like a human voice to her, and she listens to it late at night, letting the music wash over her in throaty waves, imagining the dance she would choreograph for it. If the baby awakes while the cello sings, her eyes shine in the flame of the candle Sarah often lights – glows in the music's wick. While dancing Sarah wonders, as she's done many times before, if Jesse knew the piece. Yes, Seesaw, he whispers. Yes.

Sarah falters. She catches her breath, nearly falls.

'Jesse,' she cries.

But she's alone with the baby.

There isn't even a gust of wind to be blamed. A week or so before his departure Thomas asked why she keeps torturing herself with visits to the

park. 'You have to let him go.' Thomas doesn't understand, she only half understands it herself. He isn't wrong about her stubbornness, and yet ...

She spreads out the rubber sheet on the ground. The dance has fled. Sarah reads for fifteen or twenty minutes, stretched out next to the pushchair. She's glad no one else comes to invade her space. It hasn't occurred to her to wonder why nobody seems to find this spot. Then she grows sleepy – the sun, the drowsy reading material. She upturns her textbook and lays her head on her arms across its splayed cover. I'll just take a short break, she tells herself. She sleeps.

The dream is very vivid. The sun is hot, the water a cool jewelled blue. Jesse holds the baby in his arms and wades with her into the shallows. He tosses her into the air. She screeches in delight and terror. Again he throws her up, again he catches her. Then he presses her to his chest where she clings like a limpet, and dives with her. Sleek and silent as seals they cleave the water. Deep, deeper. They swim far into the depths, where the light is dim and secretive. They pass fluorescent fish and rainbow fish and jellyfish; an underwater leafless forest, silvery and petrified; a creature like a drowned and bloated mother-in-law. Come back, Sarah calls, it's too far. The water grows colder, darker. Come back, come back. Sarah's voice slides into the water's dancing sheath. Jesse, come back.

Sarah opens her eyes. Disoriented, she's still caught in the watery forechamber of wakefulness. It takes her a moment to raise her head and focus on the present. A shadow has fallen over her, raising gooseflesh on her arms. Then her eyes widen. Jesse is standing at the side of the pushchair, his hair wet and slicked back, shoulder-length again. Droplets glisten like tiny crystals at its tips. Stooped over the baby, he's whispering softly, smiling a little. He's older and thinner, perhaps a fraction taller. He's wearing a worn pair of jeans, frayed, and what could easily be one of Finn's T-shirts. He's barefoot. He's scarred. He's perfect. Sarah's heart gives a great thud and begins to race.

'Jesse,' she says. Her throat is tight, and she can't think of anything else to say.

Jesse continues to watch the baby as though he hasn't heard, but his eyes crinkle, and Sarah realises that he's teasing her. She props herself on her elbows.

'Jesse,' she says again, her voice stronger.

Jesse bends down to kiss the baby. He strokes her cheek with a finger, then draws the blanket up to her chin while she gazes back at him with wonder. Gurgles, a laugh – her small voice like clear sweet notes running across a pebbled riverbed, stones glittering in the sunlight. Jesse laughs with her, and the air trembles – brims – with Fauré's haunting melody. A strong scent of pine drifts towards Sarah, who catches her lower lip between her teeth. She thirsts to drink from those blue, deep blue, beautiful blue eyes once more ... just once more. At that Jesse turns towards Sarah. Their eyes meet.

I promise, she hears him say. Her eyes blur with tears so that his figure swims in front of her, and she drops her head to wipe them away. When she can see clearly again, he's gone.

The baby burbles to herself and waves her hands. Soon it'll be time to feed her. Sarah rises, stiff from the ground. Despite the sunshine, it's not warm enough to lie for long outdoors. Her head feels as if it's been emptied and filled with wet sand; there's a slight throbbing behind her temples. She wonders how long she's been asleep. Will she ever stop dreaming of Jesse?

As though sensing her mother's distress, the baby falls silent, only to begin whimpering, and Sarah goes to look. The air tilts, slides – for a moment Sarah can't breathe. Then she gasps and clutches at the handles of the pushchair to steady herself. Fresh tears well in her eyes. This time she doesn't try to block them, and they course down her cheeks for a long time ... for the time it takes to wake ... to dream again ... She reaches with a tremulous hand for the small object lying on the blanket.

Peter's blue top.

She's afraid her hand will close on air. But the top is solid enough. She curls her fingers round it tightly. It's warm and tingles slightly, or her skin does. She brings it to her lips and feels its charge like a gentle kiss. Then she stares at the baby's hair, touches it with a fingertip to be sure. Strokes it. It's wet like Jesse's.

Sarah has named their daughter Ariel.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

You are free:

- **to Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- **Attribution.** You must attribute the work to the author, L. Lee Lowe (but not in any way that suggests that the author endorses you or your use of the work).

- **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

- **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to the Creative Commons web page.

- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.

This is a summary of the Legal Code (the full license). To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.